

The Newsletter of THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF STRESS

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JOB STRESS VIOLENCE EPIDEMIC

The Palm Beach Story

This Editorial was triggered by the following three news items which appeared on May 24, 1994, in The Palm Beach Post. A man under arrest for kidnapping and threatening a woman with a gun, held an Emergency Room nurse hostage for four hours, with a choke hold around her neck and a plastic razor against her throat, until he was finally subdued. During a routine deposition in a downtown office building, a 68 year old, recently terminated "workaholic", shot and killed the man he accused of taking his job, as well as a 30 year old pregnant lawyer, and critically wounded a retired judge. Elsewhere, two brothers from Wyoming had randomly selected a Denny's restaurant in suburban Indianapolis to rob. When the manager pulled a gun from the register, they went berserk, killing one, seriously wounding four, and holding two dozen other customers and employees hostage for almost six hours, before surrendering.

Restaurants and fast food facilities seem to be frequent locations for violent crimes. A month before, two gunmen had killed three workers and wounded another at a Popeye's World Famous Chicken Restaurant in Alabama. Prior to that, four girls were bound, shot, and set afire in a Texas TCBY store, and seven people were found shot to death inside a chicken and pasta restaurant in Illinois.

Job Stress and Homicides

Homicides accounted for almost one out of five of the over six thousand 1992 work related deaths. Murder was the leading cause of occupational fatalities for women, representing over 40% of female workplace deaths. Almost 8,000 workers were killed on the job in the last decade, with murder being the leading cause in Alabama, Connecticut, Maryland, Michigan, South Carolina and the District of Columbia. New York doesn't record homicides at work, as opposed to deaths from accidents, but would probably head the list, with an estimated 867 job related killings. Certain occupations and locations are more

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The Newsletter of
**THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF
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Paul J. Rosch, M.D., F.A.C.P.

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hazardous than others. While police and fire personnel come to mind, taxi drivers have more deaths on the job than both of these combined. In New York City alone, 34 taxi drivers were murdered in 1993 during robbery attempts and disputes, and 12 have already been killed in the first five months of this year. Retail workers are at particular risk, especially if they work alone, at night, or deal with money, jewels and valuables.

Robberies account for most work related homicides but violent crimes due to job stress are escalating at an alarming rate. In 1992, at least eighty supervisors, employees and clients were murdered by disgruntled workers. One clerk at a Wendy's restaurant in Oklahoma, who wanted a raise and a date with a fellow worker, shot and wounded three others and three customers. Four Taco Bell employees in Tennessee, were murdered in a gangland style shooting by a co-worker. In Colorado, a former employee killed four pizza parlor workers that had been retained. Workplace violence occurs in all sorts of occupations. A terminated, white collar Hewlett Packard worker, killed four people at his former high school in California, he held responsible for preparing him for such a "lousy job". In April, a discontent Federal Express employee, attacked the crew of the

company cargo jet with two hammers and a spear gun, critically wounding three, and injuring others. The head and upper body wounds were described as being so bloody, that "it looked like they had been in an explosion, or a film you would see of Vietnam". A Bronx subway employee, angry over job disputes, shot and killed a co-worker, critically wounded a supervisor, and then shot himself to death.

Stress from Postal Supervisors

On the surface, post office work would not appear to be particularly prone to violence. However, the postal service has officially reported an average of more than 400 assaults annually for the past several years. These are not trivial. Over the past 10 years, 34 postal workers and supervisors have been murdered on the job by enraged employees, in 10 separate incidents! Seven years ago, in a rural Oklahoma facility, a part time letter carrier facing disciplinary charges killed 14 fellow employees as well as himself. In 1991, a frustrated Michigan postal worker shot four supervisors to death before taking his own life.

As a result of such incidents, the postal system conducted an extensive study to determine what type of employee might be most prone to commit violent crimes. They examined some 350 assault records from 1989-1992, a selected sampling of the almost two thousand that had been officially filed. The conclusion was that individuals most likely to commit violent crimes, are those who are frustrated or lonely, with a history of complaining about job related problems.

However, others believe that the emphasis should be on the work environment that cultivates violent crime by contributing to employee dissatisfaction. The nature of the job itself is stressful - sorting letters on machines at a rate of one per second, lifting and throwing thousands of packages a day, and making deliveries at a pace management sets, can obviously breed tension as well as physical injuries. According to a spokesman for the American Postal Workers Union, "From our perspective, you have an extremely high stress, machine-paced

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work environment, managed by supervisors who are doctrinaire, quasi military, and breathe down workers' necks saying 'Do it my way'. You are working in a system with no accountability built into it for managers." Workers complain that they have to perform in an army-like culture, in which top managers communicate by directive, and front line supervisors often hover over them, watching every move they make. Employees are penalized for being only a few seconds late for work, may have to ask for permission if they need to go to the bathroom, and then are timed to see how long they take.

In an Oklahoma City facility, where workers and management are particularly sensitive to workplace strife because of the massacre of 14 employees at a nearby post office, all of the twenty workers interviewed in May 1993 were able to cite a recent clash that they or a close colleague had with an overbearing overseer. Some supervisors were described as "martinets, whose badge, the necktie, empowered them to treat grown men and women like boot-camp recruits." Workers claim that it is this military-like culture that creates most of their job stress. Supervisors are usually former line men, but have their own break room, and preferred parking spaces. However, "unlike military officers who are trained to take command, they are often no better educated, no better schooled in human relations, and no better paid than subordinate workers, who earn \$24,000 to \$36,000 a year, and as much as \$10,000 more with overtime." Workers here are issued a plastic time card, which they slide through a sophisticated "transactor" that records military time to the second when they check in. When they go to lunch, they must also slide their card in and punch the OL button for out to lunch, and the IL button when they return. If they leave their work station for any reason, they must also slide the card in and push the MV button, for move, and the ET button when they end their tour. Workers claim that supervisors like to use the transactor's precise records against them. Those who are a few military seconds late returning to their posts are called AWOL, and the penalty for multiple AWOL infractions is LWOP, or leave without pay.

To address these problems, the postal service is adopting new measures to: avoid hiring violent prone individuals, recognize the early warning signs of emotional upset before the situation becomes uncontrollable, develop educational programs to teach employees how to respond to interpersonal conflicts, and reevaluate or reduce certain actions and responsibilities of supervisory personnel.

Preventing Workplace Violence

No organization or occupation is immune to workplace violence. Most could profit from the steps being taken by the postal service noted above. In addition, many problems can be prevented or mitigated by the following half dozen procedures:

1. An analysis of the environment - this should evaluate how employees treat each other as well as how they are treated by superiors, and how sensitive they may be to behaviors that are perceived as threatening or abusive. Corporations can improve this by promoting feelings of security and respect between all employees.

2. Developing and enforcing standards. A written policy should be prominently posted and distributed that identifies inappropriate or abusive behavior, indicating that this will not be tolerated. It should clearly state what disciplinary actions will be taken, and these should be implemented in a consistent, impartial and fair fashion.

3. Employee grievances should be acted on quickly and responsibly, before they escalate into trouble. Human Resources and Employee Assistance Program (EAP) personnel, or a consultant psychologist, can often help defuse potentially dangerous situations. Workers should be encouraged to utilize such resources.

4. Hiring procedures may need to be overhauled, paying careful attention to ascertain any past relevant problems, and all references should be thoroughly checked. This can be facilitated by group screening and thorough background checks for signs of hostility, anger tendencies, and problems with conduct. Multiple transfers, terminations, a history of having had several jobs in a fairly short period of time, and any reports of argumenta-

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tive tendencies should send up a warning signal. Personality tests can also be useful screening tools.

5. Supervisors and managers should receive special training to identify volatile employees and in reduced risk disciplinary procedures. Discipline must be fair and consistent, and direct confrontation and written documentation of inappropriate behavior is essential. Termination procedures must be carefully thought out on an individual basis. Although unanticipated violent acts may seem surprisingly sudden and shocking, co-workers are often not astonished that the individual "blew up". Often there may be telltale warning signs, such as temper outbursts, threats, and inappropriate sensitivity and over reaction to criticism.

6. Workplace violence aftermath debriefing counseling and services for all employees and their families should be instituted within twelve hours following any incident. This is essential to minimize post-traumatic stress disorder, which is common not only in those surviving a violent incident, but also others not directly involved.

Whose Responsibility Is It?

Curbing violence in the workplace requires a team effort on the part of both employees and management. Workers must periodically be reminded to:

- take responsibility for their own safety.
- not take unnecessary risks.
- seek ways to avoid events that could become explosive.
- recognize any situation which has the potential for violence.
- be prepared with an adequate safety plan that anticipates potential problems.
- promptly report any violent act, threat, property destruction or other abusive behavior to a supervisor, management, or The Employee Assistance Program.

Management should prominently display information on:

- harassment and domestic abuse laws.
- safety tips for business travelers with respect to airport and hotel security.
- how to deal with hostile customers and co-

workers.

- self defense and personal safety measures.
- robbery prevention.
- local area crime statistics.
- limited cash on hand by posting conspicuous signs.

They should also consider:

- installing better external lighting and surveillance cameras.
- providing training in conflict resolution and non-violent response strategies.
- closing up during high risk hours.
- scheduling regular police visits to check on security measures.
- making a psychologist available for consultation.

In addition to its horrendous effects on employee physical and mental health, workplace violence takes a terrible toll on the economy, and is estimated to cost American industry \$4.2 billion annually. A helpful publication entitled *Preventing Violence in the Workplace* can be obtained by writing to: NIOSH, 4676 Columbia Parkway, Cincinnati, OH 45226-1998.

Paul J. Rosch, M.D., F.A.C.P.
Editor

Can Wellness Plans Backfire?

Wellness programs come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Proponents claim that they improve the company's fiscal health, as well as the physical and mental health of employees. A frequently cited example is the Adolph Coors Brewery Wellness Center, a 23,000 sq. ft. facility devoted to keeping workers physically fit and free from stress. It contains a state of the art gym with exercise equipment, a medical clinic, counseling center, arrangements for having your blood pressure checked or teeth cleaned, as well as stress reduction classes dealing with "anger management" and "relaxation". The program is believed to have saved the company 2 million dollars annually, by reducing sick days and medical costs. Since a detailed medical history is obtained from each participant, considerable in-

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formation is collected, which may not be kept as confidential as in a hospital or doctor's office. This potential for invasion of medical privacy can backfire when workers bring suits attempting to recover for job stress related claims. In one such case, the wife of a 54 year old worker who died of a heart attack, filed for survivor's benefits, claiming that his sudden death had been job related. She explained that two weeks previously, he had been abruptly demoted from a desk job to manual labor, following which she found him sobbing on the floor. The company argued that he died because he had smoked a pack and a half a day since the age of 14. They also knew he had mumps at the age of 8, lost his left eye in a fireworks accident at 9, had a vasectomy in 1962, and admitted to being embarrassed by his smelly feet. The administrative judge denied the widow's benefits, ruling that death was due to smoking. The decision is now being appealed.

Many workers may believe that their medical records are protected by conventional doctor-patient regulations, but this is often not the case. Some State and Federal laws do provide a certain amount of protection for alcohol and drug treatment records. However, the release forms that must be signed in order to get insurance benefits, automatically provides employers access to all medical records. The explosion of interest in Employee Assistance Programs and managed-care services has led to the creation of extensive databases that are far from confidential. At Coors, 70% of the workers agree to fill out a health hazard appraisal form, in return for a 5% saving on insurance co-payments. The form asks such questions as to whether they have problems with in-laws, a spouse or children, how much they drink, if they suffer from sexual difficulties, have high mortgage payments, low social status, or crying spells. Such Wellness and EAP programs now cover almost half of the full time employees in the United States. The cost cutting effect presumably comes from keeping them healthy. However, the biggest savings for employers may be manipulating the data to identify benefits that can be reduced, or used to shift the costs of insurance to employees whenever possible. At Hershey Foods

Corporation, workers now pay an extra \$30 a month if they have hypertension, another \$30 if they are overweight, and an additional \$10 each for high cholesterol or if they don't exercise enough. The maximum toll is \$840 per year and testing for the above is mandatory.

Some lawyers believe that such practices violate the Americans With Disabilities Act. While there is nothing to prevent companies from acting like underwriters, the use of medical records to "cherry pick" employees could represent an infringement. Nevertheless, a new industry of consulting services has sprung up to help employers identify those workers who are apt to rack up the largest health care charges. One such firm claims it can determine how much an employee costs by simply examining the results of a wellness test, lifestyle questionnaire, and prior claims history. Its president states "Management can now forecast where the ticking time bombs are in their employee population. In the hands of creative CEO's and CFO's, health-promotion programs are new profit centers". He prefers to characterize his contribution not as penalizing high risk employees, but rather rewarding those who are healthy. For one client, his company used wellness testing to weed out risky employees that could be charged higher insurance premiums, which immediately saved \$232,000. The 20% of employees who refused to take the test were charged the highest premiums, because "They were either smokers or had some condition they're trying to hide."

Who Do Employee Assistance Programs Really "Assist"?

As noted previously, "Assistance" programs can boomerang and bounce back to hurt some workers. One consultant who sets up EAPs is particularly concerned about the lack of confidentiality. When she phoned a managed-care company to inquire about one worker, the clerk who answered simply pulled up the record on her screen, remarking "Hmm... I see here she's depressed. No wonder. She had that hysterectomy two years ago". No attempt was ever made to verify who was

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calling. There are particular concerns for employees who have mental health benefits, as well as those who provide such services. Detailed records must be kept. Psychotherapists participating in managed-care programs complain that in order to be reimbursed, they are required "to report to insurance clerks such details as how often their clients masturbate, and whether they still drink too much or are thinking about suicide". One psychologist who treated a male school teacher troubled by sexual fantasies about adolescent girls, had to relate details to the school systems' insurance carrier, and worries whether this might possibly cause his patient to lose his job. Employee Assistance Programs may actually be oriented to supply such ammunition. Workers are encouraged to unload their stress related problems to counselors or a consultant, with assurances that these contacts will be kept confidential. However, once they file a claim for a job related problem, they usually must sign a release for all records, including EAP information that can be used against them.

Indeed, the EAP director for one large concern admits that his counselors are actually trained to elicit information that could be used as ammunition to fight a job related injury claim by the following technique. "The process is like this. The conversation is worked around to the realm of stress. "So what do you do to relieve stress outside of work? Do you have hobbies or participate in sports? You say you belong to the softball league... Then, when you get hurt on the job, this kind of information will be used to call into question when the injury occurred." One defense lawyer who represents employers and insurance companies, is also a psychologist. He told a group of EAP counselors and administrators that he uses any records he can to discredit an employee, explaining "My role is to see if I can get the employee to look like Charlie Manson... So I have to bring out things of a nonindustrial nature that would cause him stress."

An EAP counselor agrees, noting that "If someone files a workers' comp claim, they can have their dirty laundry exposed at a fairly public level if they've been in therapy and other stuff". There is even a monthly newsletter that advises supervisors

how to avoid suits from employees who are apt to be terminated by, referring them to an EAP, and "leave a paper trail of documentation". In one case, a cardiac nurse who complained about pains in her wrists and hands was referred to an EAP counselor who asked about her personal life and hobbies. Similar information was also sought from co-workers. When she continued to ask for medical treatment, her records were turned over to a claims adjustor. He wrote to the consulting physician, asking if her problem might have been caused by home sewing activities, based on information obtained from interviewing fellow workers about her hobby.

EAPs are increasingly being pitched to corporations as lawsuit-fighting measures, pointing out that spending a little up front can save large litigation costs down the line. Some employers will go to extreme lengths. In one California job stress claim by an administrator for the city of San Jose, her medical and gynecological history back to the age of 15 was obtained, and co-workers were interviewed about such details as the number of bathroom breaks she took. These and her EAP records were turned over to a psychiatrist hired by the city's insurer, who spent two hours asking about various aspects of her childhood, sex life and marriage. He then wrote a 25-page, single spaced report, portraying her as "lying", "narcissistic", "self-centered", and "a malingerer". His conclusion was that her problems resulted from hormones and a personality disorder, rather than the job. Although she prevailed, the ordeal was quite painful. Lawyers for the city refused to comment on the case, but stated that while sensitive to a worker's right to privacy, "In an emotional stress claim, anything in your life history is relevant."

Job Stress, Smoking, and Heart Attacks

As noted above, an administrative judge ruled that smoking was the cause of a fatal heart attack, rather than obvious job stress, in a 54 year old worker. He had just been demoted from a desk job to manual labor, following which, his wife reported

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that she had found him sobbing on the floor. This Workers Compensation decision again illustrates the current confusion concerning the true meaning of the term "risk factor", as it applies to heart attacks. Smoking, hypertension, elevated cholesterol, obesity, physical inactivity and diabetes are those most commonly cited. However, these merely represent statistical associations, rather than real causes. There are over 300 such "risk factors" for coronary heart disease, ranging from vertex baldness and a deep earlobe crease, to various abnormal lipid patterns and not drinking red wine or eating enough nuts. Removing all of these would probably not dramatically reduce the incidence of heart attacks. Requesting a hair transplant to cover a bald spot, or erasing an earlobe crease with plastic surgery to reduce the likelihood of a heart attack is inane. Nevertheless, as reported previously in the Newsletter, some anxious men have actually pursued such procedures for this purpose as a result of media hype.

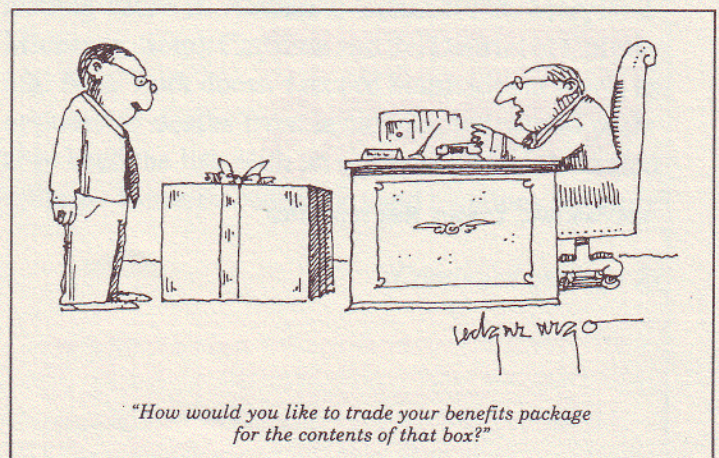
In the wake of the anti-smoking juggernaut, cigarettes have been impugned as the cause of everything from cataracts and the common cold, to hearing loss and hyperthyroidism. Stopping smoking markedly reduces lung cancer and emphysema. However, several large scale intervention studies have failed to show any similar, significant cardiovascular benefits. Parisian men tend to be heavy smokers, but have relatively low death rates from heart disease. Moreover, statistics show that cigar and pipe smokers have less than half the likelihood of heart attacks than those who never smoked!

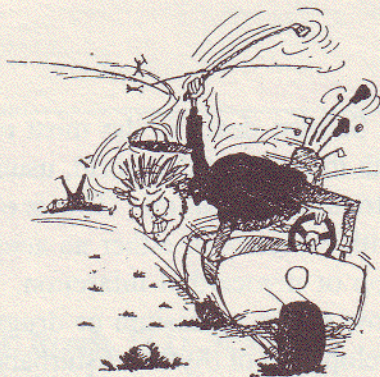
Several surveys have confirmed that job stress is clearly the leading source of stress for adult Americans. Occupations in which employees perceive they have little control but high demands, have been convincingly demonstrated to be associated with a higher incidence of heart attacks and hypertension. The relationship between job stress and heart attacks is so well acknowledged, that in New York, Los Angeles, and many other municipalities, a police officer who suffers a coronary event at any time, is assumed to have a work related disability, and is compensated accordingly — even if it occurs while fishing on vacation or gambling in

Las Vegas! Sudden death is the most common cause of death throughout the world, usually as a result of ventricular fibrillation. This is often not associated with evidence of either an acute coronary occlusion or myocardial infarction. In the absence of low serum potassium or drugs which favor the development of rhythm disturbances, the terminal event is most likely triggered by an outpouring of stress-related hormones.

Association never proves causation. Why we smoke, have high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol, may be much more important than the statistical observation of any increased correlation with these "risk factors". It is not generally appreciated that emotional stress has much more profound effects on cholesterol levels than dietary fat intake, and can also be a major contributor to smoking and hypertension. Cigarette smoking is clearly a significant health hazard that should not be condoned. However, the current hysteria about the extent of its pernicious potential needs to be put in proper perspective. From a scientific viewpoint, the observation that it is associated with an increased incidence of heart attacks or hyperthyroidism, should not be misconstrued as confirming its "risk factor" status as causes of these disorders. The link may lie in stressful behaviors that contribute to all of these, and "risk marker" might be a much more meaningful and appropriate appellation.

The above items were based largely on articles in the *Palm Beach Post*, 5/24/94, *Wall Street Journal*, 5/18/94, *USA Today*, 4/5/84, 4/8/84, *Gannett Suburbia Newspaper*, 11/29/93, *The New York Times*, 5/8/93, 5/17/93.





"Relieve STRESS... Play golf!"

A golf course outside a big town serves an excellent purpose in that it segregates, as though in a concentration camp, all the idle and idiot well-to-do. - Sir Osbert Sitwell

Lay off for a few weeks and then quit for good. - Sam Snead to a pupil

While playing golf today, I hit two good balls, I stepped on a rake. - Henny Youngman

I had a wonderful experience on the golf course today. I had a hole in nothing. Missed the ball and sank the divot. - Don Adams

The golf swing is like sex: you can't be thinking of the mechanics of the act while you're doing it. - Dave Hill

Golf - A day spent in a round of strenuous idleness. - William Wordsworth

In case of a thunderstorm, stand in the middle of the fairway and hold up a one-iron. Not even God can hit a one-iron. - Lee Trevino

If you watch a game, it's fun. If you play it, it's recreation. If you work at it, it's golf. - Bob Hope

Being left-handed is a big advantage: no one knows enough about your swing to mess you up with advice. Bob Charles

Golf is a game whose aim is to hit a very small ball into an even smaller hole, with weapons singularly ill-designed for the purpose. - Sir Winston Churchill

Golf is a good walk spoiled. - Mark Twain



The American Institute of Stress

7th ANNUAL Less Stress GOLF TOURNAMENT

Thursday, August 25, 1994
St. Andrews Golf Club
Hastings-on-Hudson, New York
(914) 478-3500

Our annual "Less Stress" Golf Tournament is now an official MET PGA event. This year's outing should attract some of the top golf professionals and celebrities in the Metropolitan Area. The shotgun-scamble format will begin at 12:00 Noon with food and refreshments being served on the course, followed by an elegant Buffet presentation of awards after the conclusion of play (golf attire). Continental breakfast will be available for those who wish to arrive early and utilize the practice facility. Awards for low gross and low net foursomes, longest drives, nearest the pin, \$10,000 for holes-in-one for both amateurs and professionals, and great raffle and auction. Combined handicaps will be used to determine low net awards by the popular scramble format utilized in previous events, so that everyone can contribute. The field will be limited to 100 players, so sign up now to reserve your spot.

The American Institute of Stress is a non profit organization founded in 1971 to serve as an informational clearing house on all stress related subjects. Contributions are tax deductible to the extent provided by law. Entry fee includes golf cart, breakfast, lunch, dinner, open bar and a year's complimentary subscription to The Newsletter. The American Institute of Stress.

Count me in. Enclosed is my check made out to The American Institute of Stress

_____ \$100 golf hole sponsor sign
_____ \$300 entry fee
_____ \$500 entry fee for two
_____ \$1,000 entry fee for four (and golf hole sponsorship)

NAME _____
ADDRESS _____
PHONE OR FAX # _____ SLOPE _____ OR HANDICAP _____
OTHERS IN GROUP _____

I WOULD LIKE TO CONTRIBUTE THE FOLLOWING TAX DEDUCTIBLE ITEMS FOR A RAFFLE
(Please indicate value for tax deduction purposes on the reverse side)

.....

In the Bob Hope Classic the participation of President Gerald Ford was more than enough to remind you that the nuclear button was at one stage at the disposal of a man who might have either pressed it by mistake or else pressed it deliberately to obtain room service. Clive James

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