

"Things That Matter"

by Laci Coleman

NOW HE'S CRAZY, NOW HE'S NOT

Excuse me. Maybe I'm a little slow, but I'm still trying to sort out what has happened in the case of John W. Hinckley, Jr., would-be presidential assassin.

A few months ago, a man in our city received a jail sentence for treating a dog cruelly. Yet, this fellow Hinckley walks up and shoots the President of the United States, disables the President's press secretary James Brady for life, and wounds two other people in the presence of scores of witnesses, and he beats the rap with an insanity plea.

Now we are told that Hinckley could be released from St. Elizabeth's hospital in Washington, D.C., in August, if a hearing on August 9 goes in his favor. The hearing has been scheduled by U.S. District Court Judge Barrington D. Parker to decide whether Hinckley is no longer a danger to himself or others.

So, after his defense attorney worked so hard to prove that Hinckley was crazy when he assaulted the President, this poor, misguided lad will be working just as hard to prove the opposite. In a recent telephone interview with a reporter, Hinckley said, assuming that the doctors determine that he

has regained his senses, "I'm going to walk out the door, whether the public likes it or not."

And if he walks out the door, what then? Nothing, maybe. But, then again, some of us are haunted by memories of cases like that of Michael Hightower, a 32-year-old Idaho man, who was permitted to walk out the door twice before attempting to murder a nurse near Everett, Washington. Hightower had raped women on two different occasions, and, in both instances, was judged not guilty on grounds of mental illness.

One would be more impressed with the validity of the insanity defense were psychiatry an exact

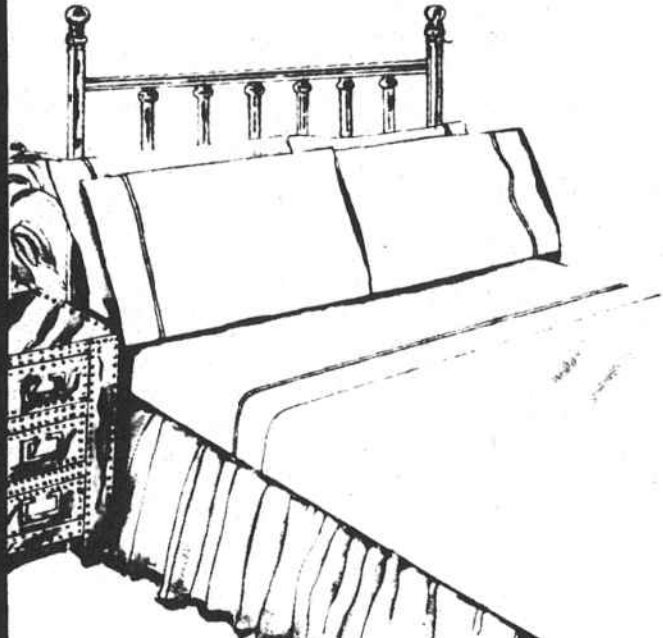
science. It is not. Jurors certainly must be confused by the conflicting testimony they hear from "experts" in psychiatry who disagree with one another.

Another problem I have with the insanity plea is that it tends to favor those who have rich fathers who can afford to pay for the services of expensive lawyers and high-priced psychiatrists. One difference between Hinckley and the guy who went to jail for abusing a dog is that the latter fellow was just an average blue-collar worker. One can't help but wonder how the two cases would have turned out had the financial positions of the two defendants been reversed.

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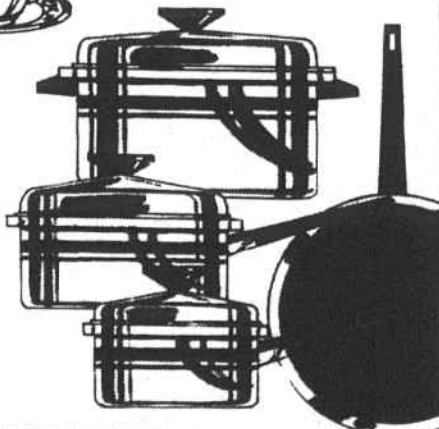
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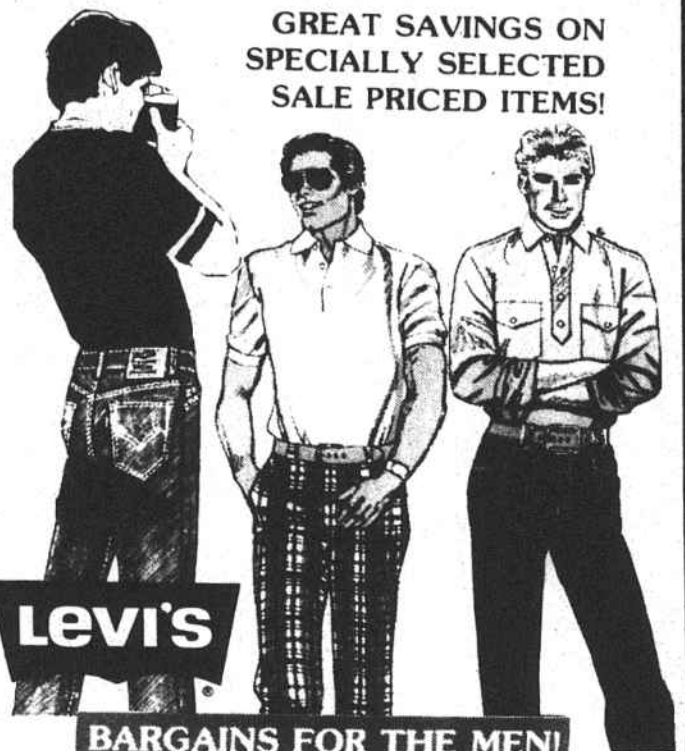
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