

THE CLIMATE OF VIOLENCE

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On November 22, 1963, United States President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Two days later his assassin was murdered before the eyes of the police who guarded him. The shocked and unbelieving country endured a three-and-a-half-day period of mourning under the direction of the television networks. The news coverage by the communications media was massive and complete, and under the circumstances generally, but not entirely, restrained. Other thoughts and emotions were guided and interpreted for us during the time by an impressive number of somber-voiced, oracular pundits and analysts of press radio and television. Hundreds of citizens from all stations in life were interviewed, but decently—no microphones were shoved under the First Lady's nose to inquire of her reactions to the tragic event. Her conduct and dignity throughout the public ordeal was magnificent and should serve as a model to all.

The three days of sorrowing and silence offered time for the nation to think upon its ways. The public discovered that it was possible to survive for three days without viewing a single television commercial. The country, among the welter of emotions, statements and opinions, heard many voices raised in recrimination, urging it to examine its practices and its conscience. Many questions were raised, many answers were given, many questions still remain.

Chief Justice Warren, in his remarks at the service in the Capitol rotunda, inveighed against the hatreds and fanaticisms that have eaten their way into the bloodstream of American life and against the spreaders of the venom and bitterness that begat violence. Columnists indicted the "extremists, both right and left" for creating a climate of accusation and dissent that bred the violence culminating in the assassination. Prominent psychiatrists were interviewed who delved into the psyche of America and came up with properly alarming and wordy pronouncements: the assassin had a "father fixation," the populace suffers from unresolved anxieties.

That there is dissention and accusation present in our national climate cannot be denied; nor can the increase in hatred, bitterness and fanaticism be overlooked. That they contribute to violence and a disturbingly dangerous national mood is certainly evident. But forces such as these do not arise spontaneously; they are provoked and developed from deeper causes. The complexity of pressures in a materialistic society that contribute to a national climate do not lend themselves to rational analyses by opinionated observers. The causes are many and evident, but they are difficult to pinpoint or rate in relative importance.

Assassinations or attempts at assassination have always been a concomitant danger to political life, particularly in monarchies, dictatorships and democracies such as ours where the presidential figure is an influential one. The common denominators of nearly all such violent acts are two: first, powerful and controversial government heads who have often reached or maintained their positions of prominence by practices carried out with more regard to the ends than to the means of achievement; and second, fanatical and often unbalanced individuals with deep personal or political grievances reacting in what they mistakenly feel is righteous indignation.

The nation is asked to study its conscience, to contemplate its ways. In doing so questions arise; some obvious, some not so obvious, some embarrassing. Should some questions be suppressed because they are distasteful or lead to embarrassment? How does one examine a conscience? For example: does the act of assassination become more monstrous because of its locale and because of the personalities involved? A former state governor, Huey P. Long, was intensely disliked and opposed by most of the so-called "decent" and educated element in Louisiana. Were they and the political climate created by their opposition to Long the cause of his violent death? Again, in what respects does the assassination of President Kennedy differ from the assassination only a few weeks earlier of Viet Nam's President Diem and his brother, who were done in by forces to which the policy makers of our own presidential administration gave tacit encouragement and support? Did the administration's attitude contribute to a climate of bitterness and hatred in Viet Nam?

If a nation is to examine its conscience, wherein in the examination of conscience must one draw the line? Should the political conscience be exempt from examination? Does the politician who, with little regard for ethics or morality, exchanges favors and patronage for votes and financial campaign support, contribute to a climate of greed and viciousness? Can a politician who blatantly uses every sham and artifice of press-agentry to foster his popularity and keep himself and his associates constantly in the public eye, expect other than a national climate of hypocrisy and cynicism? Is the politician who compromises his integrity and countenances bribery, vote-stealing and the multitude of dishonest and sordid practices of machine politics, and then complacently accepts his reward of office, to be concerned with conscience? Do his actions contribute to a climate of accusation and distrust?

There are other and even more embarrassing questions. Since this one act of assassination is the nidus responsible for our soul-searching, can we ask if Mr. Kennedy's reasons for going to Texas were initiated by his concern for his country, or his concern for reelection? Was Mrs. Kennedy's presence with him only because of a natural marital devotion, or, as was reported prior to the trip, a calculated political maneuver to utilize

her attractiveness and appeal to bolster a suspected decline in presidential esteem? If the assassin's bullets had struck the First Lady instead of the President, could a political conscience ever have rationalized such a tragedy?

President Kennedy, because of the circumstances of his untimely death, assumes the posthumous role of martyr in the eyes of many. Ardent admirers and previous supporters understandably take the opportunity at such a time to eulogize their idol; critics, because of propriety and in deference to the grieving, usually remain silent. If non-admirers would speak out in any but complimentary fashion, they are put in the uncomfortable position of appearing unpatriotic and somehow aligned with the assassin and the forces of anarchy.

Death does not automatically confer upon a leader qualities that may have been lacking during life. The immediate period of mourning, filled as it always is with overcharged emotion, is hardly the time to evaluate for history the worth of an individual. Time and history alone will render a verdict on our last president. The remedies and guiding principles that will help to improve the national climate will not be found in the clever utterances and political catch-phrases of the present or future. They have been stated well in the Commandments of the past. As we have sown, so now we are reaping.

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