

The Climate of Freedom

Lessons drawn from the tragic assassination of President Kennedy in Texas.

By Joseph Martin Dawson

IN THE AFTERMATH of the President's assassination it is certain that people in no American locality are more deeply troubled than Texans, and more particularly those in Dallas. Profoundest aspects of their anxiety are seen in two persistent questions that haunt them. First, how can freedoms—free speech, freedom of enterprise, academic freedom, political freedom—survive in the face of terrible ever-present risks? Then they ask that second question, to what extent do these dire risks arise from atmosphere or climate? But the nation, too, must make answer; hence this discussion is of concern to all.

Consider these questions against the background of Dallas and the state of Texas. On that fateful day of the President's assassination, friendly big Dallas put on its gala garments for the most gigantic parade of all its many past tributes to visitors, which have never been confined to football heroes, regional and remote men of renown and even to five former presidents of the United States, but whoever they were have been accorded the eminent in all categories. It remained for President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, accompanied by his lovely wife, Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson, Governor John Connally and their charming wives, to receive the greatest ovation ever witnessed in the North Texas metropolis.

The Reaction in Dallas

When the diabolical shots suddenly interrupted this unprecedented manifestation of hospitality and good will, Dallas went into instant, concerted action to save the wounded and to apprehend the guilty. One policeman gave up his life in his effort to arrest the suspected fleeing assassin. Doctors and nurses worked with utmost skill and speed to avert death. All who could not personally aid, prayed. Alas, the President was dead and the Governor desperately maimed. There was so little that the people as a whole could do, it was maddening. After many weeks they are trying to find out what to do.

This is not a descriptive narration of events following the incredible assassination, but a serious confrontation of the two questions raised in this article at the outset, in relation to problems which affect the whole nation, compelling consideration.

Immediately after the assassination, some critics began sniping at Dallas, holding the city responsible. In the reigning excitement of the hour these critical shots were sparse and scarcely audible. As the veteran newsman, H. V. Kaltenborn, broadcast, "Everybody in the nation that commented said the right thing." So it seemed then, but the volume of reproach for Dallas has increased, also the sharpness of it, with constant accu-

sations of ugly acts by conservative extremists.

Meantime Dallas citizens failed to flare into a rage of resentment. Long lines of cars, causing a constant traffic jam, moved in awe past the assassination spot, many of them pausing to lay wreaths of flowers to which were attached cards with touching inscriptions on them. Schools were dismissed, business houses closed, churches held memorial services. Sorrow gripped the populace. Day after day the cars rolled by and in place of wilted flowers fresh ones piled up, with such words on them as, "God, forgive us all." And finally the city began planning a colossal enduring memorial to the lamented President, perhaps a beautiful colonnade beside a mirroring pool and a blaze burning, lit from the eternal flame ignited at the grave in Arlington Cemetery. Nothing has been decided as yet, but assuredly it will be a *magnum opus*.

As criticisms of Dallas have grown, so far as this outsider has observed, there have been few voices from within the city uplifted publicly to defend against them. Defense has come from an unexpected source, such as from the chaplain of the United States Senate, Dr. Frederick Brown Harris.

The editor of the *Fort Worth Press* writes so intelligently that he deserves to be quoted:

If there are two hard hitting rivals in the country, they are Fort Worth and Dallas. But today we come to the defense of our neighbor. Dallas is a vibrant, strong, patriotic American city. And the good people who live there are being crucified. Dallas has its crackpots, its dissidents, its evil people. So have all our cities. And we in other cities well could have said when it happened, "There, but for the grace of God is our city." A blanket indictment of all the good people of Dallas, a calculated smearing of a city for the crime of one man, or two, is not in the spirit of this nation. Does not all our nation bear this scar and this shame? Does it not belong to us as much as to nearly one million people who live in Dallas, and its environs and now hurt so deeply and personally?

The citizens of Dallas might well reply to antagonists: "You reproach us for being rightists, but the accused, don't you see, was a radical leftist." Again they could say, "You talk about our 'atmosphere' or 'climate' as being conducive to violence, but the alleged killer was not spawned here; he only commuted here for the last two months to work for a textbook distributor; he borrowed no book from our public library; he was an alien and an enemy to our way of life." Still, again they could rightly say: "Dallas, long known as a moderate city, has a hundred-year record for striving after the excellent in civic affairs, in education, in literature, the arts and sciences, for institutions that serve community need." They could go on to urge, "Why did practically every religious denomination, decades ago, select Dallas for its state headquarters, thus adding numerous magazines to our publication lists and huge bookstores to our moral and cultural resources?"

True, Dallas has tolerated some extreme rightists and

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