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The Seeds of Mayhem

In the days of numbed shock and national self-doubt that followed Robert Kennedy's assassination last June, President Johnson enlisted a thirteen-man commission "to undertake a penetrating search for the causes and prevention of violence—a search into our national life, our past as well as our present, our traditions as well as our institutions, our culture, our customs and our laws." Last week the violence commission released a progress report on its investigation. It offered no conclusions and no recommendations—these will come in the final report due in the spring—but it did make clear that the commission's explorers are leaving hardly a stone unturned on America's strife-torn social landscape.

Violence in contemporary America, the commission stressed, is not only robbery and assault, riot and assassination, a campus building seized or a political candidate heckled. It is also the violence "of overseas war . . . of police dogs, fire hoses and cattle prods . . . discrimination and deprivation, disease, hunger and rats . . . of capital punishment, of slaughter on the highways, of movies, of radio and television programs, of some professional sports."

To trace such widely scattered seeds of mayhem, the commission has set up eight task forces that have in turn

launched no fewer than 185 separate research projects. Sample titles: "Overcrowding and Human Aggression," "The J-Curve of Rising and Declining Satisfaction: Its Appearance Before Some Great Revolutions and Some Contained Rebellions," "History of Vigilantism in the United States," "Endocrine Aspects of Violence," "The Invocation and Constraint of Religious Zealotry," "Political Assassinations in China, 1600-1968."

Typical: The work program of the Task Force on Assassination is typical of the commission's ambitious approach. Not only does the team analyze the "psychological pattern" of the nine men who have tried, four of them successfully, to kill Presidents of the United States (all were white males, "smaller than average in stature," and, except for John Wilkes Booth, "virtually unknown"; five were born abroad and then became naturalized citizens; four had unhappy marriages; seven had suffered a decline in socio-economic status in the year preceding the assassination attempt). It is also "seeking to identify particular groups in the United States that may have a potential for resorting to political violence"—though so far it has fingered no group smaller than the nation's youth. And the commission is trying to figure out ways to help protect public figures; for this purpose, the Stanford Research Institute has been hired to use game theory "to project and assess strategies of assassination and defense."

"The elimination of all violence in a free society is impossible," the progress report concedes, and it points out that some forms of violence—police power, parental coercion and self-defense—are generally considered legitimate. "But the better control of illegitimate violence in our democratic society," the commission states, "is an urgent imperative, and one within our means to accomplish."