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In Tragic America

The skyline of urban America in the past week has been a desolating one—not only the landscape but the manscape: fire-riddled blocks of houses and looted shops cordoned off in the Negro ghettos; great cities turned into fortresses and watched over by Guardsmen and soldiers; cities ravaged and beleaguered by their own dwellers from within and occupied from without. No wonder foreign observers of this apocalyptic scene have asked in a deeply troubled vein whether American society is proving a stable enough frame to hold together against these violent tensions.

After the burial of Martin Luther King, let us be very clear about one fact: The wave of mourning for him that has swept the nation is composed of equal parts of authentic sorrow, of guilt feelings, and the fake-hypocritical.

There are those who grieve genuinely over the loss of a creative and humanist leader, not always an effectual one. But there are also whites who thought King an extremist when he was alive, and there are black separatists who thought him a Tom; there are blacks who, after his death, made a mystique of destroying the cities he wanted to save, and there are whites so guilt-ridden and impassioned that their feeling about the burning cities is "Let them burn."

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Don't count me among them. Clearly the outbursts of violence in the cities came out of the immediate anger at King's death and the long pent-up rage at white injustices against Negroes. To express these angers was healthy, but the prolonged inner assault against the city of Washington—repeatedly revived each time it flagged—could no longer be explained as a catharsis, but only as the beginnings of an adventurist effort at guerrilla war.

At that point the perspective ceases to be that of finding the best way to right the injustices against the Negro, which King was concerned with. It becomes either a way of bringing down on the modern Sodoms and Gomorrahs the wrath of an avenging God, or else a way of breaking the strength of a vicious imperialist America from within.

There is always, of course, the danger of overstating the importance of what has happened. A decade from now the burning beleaguered cities may seem only a slight scarring episode, whether as a break in the history of the ongoing process of bringing justice to the Negro ghetto, or as the penny-ante forerunner of the really big power-stakes and the big violence to come. Maybe. But my own guess is that this is a turning point of some kind. From now on we shall have to live with the fact that large-scale violence has been built into the racial response to symbolic wounding events, like King's death, and while the calendar of the cities may change the pattern has been set.

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The man who killed King was sick, and there are a lot of sick people in America. The injustices that white society has done the Negro society have been grave, and there are evils that have not yet been ended. But it is folly to jump from this to a total indictment of a total nation. America is not a healthy or great society, but neither is it a sick or evil society. It is a tragic society.

We live in a tragic era, in tragic America. One thinks of George Meredith's lines: "In tragic life, God wot,/Passions spin the plot." A total rage, a total hate, a total sense of guilt, a total and desperate fear: these are the passions that are engaged today in white-black relations, and they spin the plot of what the American cities are enmeshed in. With every episode of a

symbolic killing and a symbolic sequence of burning and looting the polarizing of emotion toward extreme attitudes goes ever farther.

When I use "tragic" here I do so in the sense Max Scheler used when he wrote on Greek tragedy: that the tragic is what happens when men, in pursuit of justice or some other high purpose, destroy something even more precious than the goal they seek. I think this is happening to America today.

The goal of justice must be a committed one, pursued in a committed way. But to burn and loot in its name, and to feel that the fires achieve some cleansing result, is to repeat the distortions practiced in every violent era in the name of something lofty. The result is to erode the human fabric itself, at the expense of the quality of life as lived by blacks and whites alike, together and apart.