

NEWSPAPERS

Responsibility Amid Emotion

"Grief," "shock," "shame"—the words appeared over and over again in the nation's press after the assassination of Martin Luther King. "We are becoming in the eyes of the world, and to an alarming degree in fact," said the Louisville Courier-Journal, "a violent nation of violent people, given to a disregard for life that must shame decent people here and throughout the world." Most papers declared that it was time for a nationwide soul searching. The assassination "demands the most sober reflection," editorialized the Los Angeles Times, "the deepest national self-examination."

But one commentator, at least, warned against going too far. "The man who killed King was sick," wrote Max Lerner, "and there are a lot of sick people in America. But it is folly to jump from this to a total indictment of a total nation." The wave of mourning that has swept the nation, continued Lerner, is "composed of equal parts of authentic sorrow, of guilt feelings and the fake-hypocritical. 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.'" Expression of anger is understandable, but the "prolonged assault" against the city of Washington could "no longer be explained as a catharsis but only as the beginnings of an adventurist effort at guerrilla war."

To William F. Buckley, King's method of defying the law may have contributed to his martyrdom. "It is a terrifying thought that most likely the cretin who leveled his rifle on the head of King may have absorbed the talk, so freely available, about the supremacy of the individual conscience, such talk as Martin Luther King, God rest his troubled soul, had so widely and so indiscriminately made."

**Mask for Tensions.** A few commentators eloquently separated the man from the martyr. In *Newsday*, Frank Lynn recalled "two terrifying hours" in Philadelphia, Miss., site of the slaying of the three civil rights workers, when King led 200 marchers through the streets. Cursed, clubbed, spat on by vicious whites unrestrained by police, King "refused to bow to the passion of the moment" and continued to march without faltering or fighting back.

"He was a strange man," noted Columnist James J. Kilpatrick, longtime editor of the *Richmond News Leader*, "the hardest of all the Negro leaders or a reporter to get to know. It was possible to joke with Thurgood Marshall, philosophize with Roy Wilkins, reminisce with James Farmer, but King remained an impenetrable figure. His faintly Oriental face was a calm mask

for the tensions that surged unceasingly within him. Yet he was the bravest man I ever knew in public life. During the terrible days that followed upon the school desegregation ruling, no white Southerner ever matched a fraction of his courage. To watch one of his marches was to sense the awesome power of strong character combined with high purpose. This is the way it must have been, one reflected, when the early Christians braved the hate and ridicule of Rome."

Interestingly, the Negro press displayed a more restrained grief than the white press, confirming perhaps the *Wall Street Journal's* judgment that "White America may have been more shocked

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"THE ODD THING ABOUT ASSASSINS, DR. KING, IS THAT THEY THINK THEY'VE KILLED YOU"

than Black America at the assassination. To Negroes, the slaying of Dr. King, many observers suggest, was just another injustice, however horrific." A few papers like *In Sepia Dallas* speculated: "Just imagine if all the bigots were suddenly assassinated." But most emphasized King's lifelong quest for racial brotherhood. "It is our fervent hope," said the *Michigan Chronicle*, "that his death will be a signal for deeper commitment to what he lived and worked for. It would be compounding the tragedy of his death if it were a signal for an orgy of violence. It would be a denial of all he had hoped for."

**Too Tense to Think.** One Negro paper, the *Los Angeles Herald-Dispatch*, was perhaps the soberest of all the nation's press. "The American Caucasian has lost the best friend he ever had," wrote the paper. Beyond that it would not comment. Said the paper's chief editorial writer: "The *Herald-Dispatch* does not propose to discuss Dr. King and his activities in the wake of a \$500 million funeral—a real Hollywood production. This production has creat-

ed entirely too much emotion. When people are emotional, they are unable to think or to reason. We plan to discuss it in three weeks, when our minds are less tense."