

ALLARD K. LOWENSTEIN: Haunted by great absences

How long ago it seems since the three most beloved and promising figures in America all died within five years, all murdered strangely, all having lived only half their lives. And how easy it is to think that what has happened to us since then was somehow inevitable, to forget that these deaths changed the national mood and direction, and that much that has happened might not have happened were it not for this series of events that left us haunted by great absences through years made difficult in part by those absences.

Perhaps because Robert Kennedy was the last of the three to die, his death seemed the cruelest — bearing the cumulative freight of the preceding horrors, multiplying the doubt

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that there was any place for hope in a society where the best spokesmen for hope could not survive. He was not a prophet like Martin Luther King Jr., nor a President like his brother, but he touched his countrymen in a special way, reaching large numbers of people who were least sure that they belonged, and so were hardest to touch. That was a boon to this country, and to democracy itself.

Robert Kennedy meant as much as he did to as many as he did partly because he was his brother's brother, and his death hurt as much as it did partly because he died so early and so wrongly. But the totality of loss was far greater than these parts, for with him went the spirit of a generation. When he was killed, so was something generous and electric in us and in the nation, something not yet reborn and possibly not to be reborn in our lifetime. We were left instead with a scar too close to the heart to

be forgotten with the changing of faces in high places; and with leaders whose bleakness was to remind us through a damaging decade of what might have been.

As a politician, Robert Kennedy was less than heroic, and as a hero he was uncomfortable and uncertain. But by the end he was blending in common purpose not just the rich and poor and black and white and young and old that he invoked too often during his last campaign, but toughness and gentleness, and the pragmatic and the uplifting as well.

More than anyone since FDR, he brought people together at the price of driving others away. But in a time of great divisions he brought more people together than any of his contemporaries, and he made more people believe that they could, as he liked to say, "make a difference." He wanted everyone to see what seemed so obvious to him; that if people couldn't

be roused to try to make a difference in the effort to "reclaim" their country, they would make a difference anyway by not trying.

Before and better than anyone else, he understood the realities of power in the U.S. Almost alone, he saw the nature of the lassos that were hobbling the machinery of democracy, and he set out to weaken the hobblers and strengthen the hobbled.

And somehow, through all the commotion, he managed to keep growing. He died just as the sense of promise that he inspired had overtaken the resentments and suspicions that he aroused. He was getting better as the nation's prob-

lems were getting worse, and in retrospect almost everyone saw that he was needed more than anyone had understood until he was gone.

I was never close to Robert Kennedy. Our relationship was political, and sometimes adversary at that. In the early days there were some very basic conflicts. And of the only year I knew him at all well, it would be accurate to say that I spent one half arguing that he should run for President when he wouldn't, and the other half supporting an opponent when he did. Yet he meant more to me, as to so many others, than any other political figure of the time, and the awful fact of his unnatural

death will shadow events as long as we are a part of them. But there is at last again an administration struggling to revive hopes and excite energies, struggling with the problem that is connected to so many others: the problem of how a spirit once aborted can be drift back, but they are harder to hear now through the tired litany of My Lai and wheat deals and Elizabeth Ray and Spiro Agnew and "I am not a crook." The mind wanders past jaded words, there is no radiance, nothing is clear-cut. We have learned that Camelot was not quite Camelot, and that America is neither as innocent nor as easily changed as we

once thought. It has become sensible to be cynical. But anybody who thinks about it knows that it is sensible, too, to remember that greater sophistication is not the same thing as greater wisdom, that an immobilizing cynicism is not cure for what has gone wrong; knows that it is past time to try to do better.

And anybody who finds himself wishing on this occasion that Robert Kennedy were still around, knows what Robert Kennedy would be saying if he were — knows that we have dallied long enough, and that it is past time to try again to make a difference, to dream again of things as they ought to be and to ask again why they are not.

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