



Max Lerner

Loner or Conspirator?

Consider the man called James Earl Ray, who also seems to have used a number of other names and is now the target of a vast manhunt. When Martin Luther King was killed the first widespread impulse—which I shared with others—was to assume that the bullet had been governed by the assassin's passion of racist hatred. I wrote that the man, like the act, had been "sick, sick." But if Ray is in fact the man who pulled the trigger—and obviously that must remain an "if" until all the evidence is in—the theory of a single hate-governed assassin may not hold up.

Another theory, which cannot be ignored and is gaining some credence, is that it was a "contract job," much like any gangland murder, with some petty criminal punk serving as the gunman, but also with precise planning for the murder and getaway. This does not rule out racist hatred on the part of the gunman himself, who may have lent himself more readily to the killing because it jibed with his own twisted broodings about how to set the world right. But it puts the focus not only on the killer but on whatever other men used him.

From this angle of vision many of the details now emerging about Ray—his criminal convictions, his jail term and escape, his travels, his bank account, his purchases and expenditures—seem to fall into a meaningful pattern. The trail will probably cool and warm again a number of times before the FBI catches up with him—if it ever does.

For Attorney General Clark's early description of the killer as "a lone man on the run" may no longer be true. It seems probable now that he was not a lone man, and he may no longer be on the run. If in fact there were others who used him for their purposes his capture now would be intolerable to them, and the indicated course for them would be to kill him before he can be caught. If they are not able to—and that too is possible—his capture should uncover quite a story.

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Inevitably, of course, one thinks of another killer in another assassination—that of John Kennedy—which has not been cleared up in the minds of many people and may never be wholly resolved. There is even the weird coincidence in the evidence that Galt-Ray made one or several trips to New Orleans, which awakens memories of Oswald's stay in that city, and of the erratic efforts of Jim Garrison to prove a New Orleans conspiracy using Oswald as a "patsy" and to hang it on the CIA and the FBI.

It all adds up to a climate of conspiracy along with the climate of hate. It is well to be on our guard against both. There is hot violence and there is cold violence—the kind that springs out of massive anger and the kind that comes from calculated plan.

If one had to choose it is better to strike out from anger than to move in cold blood. One recalls William Blake's sentence: "The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction." I should deny any real wisdom to the violence that comes out of wrath, as against the effort of reason, but I certainly prefer the wrath to the cold conspiracy.

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The day of the loner is probably passing, whether we think of the creative adventurist loner or the lonely assassin. For many things that were once done by individuals we carry over from the Army today the term of "operation." Even political leadership

involves a "team."

Yet it would be folly to carry this to the point of believing that nothing disastrous ever happens except as the result of a conspiracy. The fact is that one of the strongest elements in the climate of violence today is the compulsion to believe that we are surrounded by conspiracies. This is the paranoid view of life—that nothing happens to us either by chance, or through our own deserts, but only as the result of a planned operation by our enemies. Believing there is an enemy plot against him and his group the paranoid personality strikes out—whether in hot or cold blood—to foil it. Thereby he adds to the climate of violence and two climates—of violence and conspiracy—are fused.

Some day we may discover what prompted Dr. King's killer—whether it was the wrathful violence of a True Believer, or violence used coldly as an instrument, with a smoldering paranoid resentment deep within. In either case it is essential that the assassin be tracked down, not for the sake of vengeance, but because we need to know what moves in the distorted minds of men before we can achieve even a measure of reason.