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STANLEY KAUFFMANN *Scar-Spangled Banner*

I have never seen a phrase pass more quickly into the language than H. Rap Brown's remark of a few weeks back: "Violence is as American as cherry pie." Political columnists and book reviewers and ministers and editorial writers have used it as promptly and easily as if they had been born knowing it. Which, of course, is the figurative truth. Every country is blood-soaked, but America has a special combination of three characteristics. Two of them have been much discussed: the fact that this country was founded by forcibly dispossessing a native population, and the heritage of Negro slavery. There is a third element: the capacity to disguise ruthless power-drives in comfy benevolence. (Money-men are not really interested in money, folks. You have a *friend* at Chase Manhattan. What's good for General Motors is good for the country.) Brown's remark at once bares a truth and mocks our gift for disguising it in homely pieties. The metaphorical murder in the Madison Avenue meeting-room and the stomping in a deserted park are both as American as cherry pie. The acceptance of disguised brutalities has helped the acceptance of overt violence — homicidal violence — as an ingrained part of American life. Not all of us would use such violence but not many of us are really shocked by it any more.

Do I exaggerate? Is Lee Harvey Oswald too glib an example of American behavior because every country has political assassins? Or would-be assassins? Then why did the murder of George Lincoln Rockwell produce — in some of us, at least — only the sense of a recognizable American behavior pattern? (Or doesn't Rockwell's murder count, because of his beliefs?) Every country has its psychopathic murderers, but are we exceeding the actuarial quota with the University of Texas sniper and the Chicago nurse-killer and the Minnesota farmer — who killed his wife and four children — all bursting out within one year? On the day on which I write this, *The New York Times* reports that a young man is accused of a triple murder in Alabama.

He wanted to kill the girl who had jilted him but she hid herself, so instead he killed her 18-year-old crippled sister, her 9-year-old sister, and the latter's 8-year-old girl friend who was visiting. The young man is the son of a university professor. The whole story was a *minor item*, buried on Page 43. Perhaps we are all used to violence by now because America is not only the home of the tough-guy ethos — the gun-slinging Western badman, the machine-gunning hood — but even the Good Guys are tough, like the private eye. When psychopathic murders happen abroad, they seem anomalous, like the Moors murders in England. When they happen here, as witness the *Times'* treatment of this latest triple murder, they don't seem so crazy, *they seem American.*

Possibly I do exaggerate. But all this has been borne in on me by a coincidence that must be more than a coincidence. Thomas Berger's new book *Killing Time*¹ is the third novel in a row that I have read for review here that is concerned with violence as an inseparable element of modern American life. Susan Sontag's *Death Kit* treats it in psychotic subjectivity; Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* treats it analogically; Berger treats it descriptively, coolly, at times almost idyllically, and therefore satirically.

The chief defect of Berger's book is that he is quite aware of everything in American life mentioned above but seems unaware of how often it has been dealt with in American fiction. Although his book is written succinctly and dryly and genuinely, it seems repetitious from Page One. In his last novel, *Little Big Man*, Berger took a familiar literary mode, the tall tale, and freshened it with a freshet of imagination. Here he takes another familiar device — the abnormal man who seems saner than the normal people around him — but this time he does not freshen it sufficiently. In itself the device is par-

¹ *Killing Time*, by Thomas Berger (Dial; \$5.95).

² *Lee Harvey Oswald*, by Michael Hastings (Penguin Books; \$1.25).

ticularly familiar in plays and films: *Harvey*, *Persona*, *King of Hearts*, *Life Upside Down* are a few widely differing examples. Berger has set it in the modern American ambience of violence that we know from such authors as Nathanael West, Mailer, Terry Southern, and Joseph Heller — a view of violence that is wry, incredulously protesting yet shruggingly accepting. Berger adds little that is new.

His central character is a fungoid religious paranoiac who unexcitedly murders three people. This man is composed, gentle (most of the time), ingenious in argument; the sane people involved in the case are frustrated and dissatisfied, vicious in one way or another, unclear in their minds. He has inner peace; they have inner turmoil. He has asked a number of doctors to cut off his penis. (He tried it once himself, but it was too painful.) Most of the men in this book have either had their penises cut off — in effect — by women or have had themselves cut off and now have only their penises left.

And so on. The fact that one can say "and so on" is, unfortunately, what is wrong with the book. To me there is only one telling section. The paranoiac's mother sounds a great deal like Oswald's mother — particularly as rendered by Michael Hastings in his recently published play *Lee Harvey Oswald*.² (Hastings' play is closely based on many of the books about the assassination, including the Warren Commission Report.) There is also a resemblance between the mother-and-son relationships in Berger's novel and in Hastings' play — a resemblance in tonality, not in story. I imply, of course, only a common source to the two authors.

Most of the time, however, when reading Berger's book, one seems to be rereading it. Either it revisits familiar territory — the reporter's inside view of the seamy side — like a hip Ben Hecht, or it makes ironic contrasts of sanity and insanity that are, by now, among the commonest of insights. *Killing Time* is a triple pun.

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solution to the crucial problems of education of Negro and Puerto Rican children.

. . . In general, these cautions made very little dent on Mr. Alsop, who disagreed with almost all the comments made and was irritated by some of them. He said at that point it was futile to discuss such points any more as *nobody would change his mind.*"

There is also the little matter of money. Alsop disposes of desegregation as impractical, but does not explain how practical it will be to get the nation to "invest until it hurts cruelly." MES costs \$1,263 per child, \$700 more than in regular primary schools in the New York system. It also requires 30 percent more schoolrooms and roughly twice the staff members of regular elementary schools in the city. And since MES has so far obtained only modest test score increments at best, these costs are gross underestimates for achieving Alsop's goal of average performance at grade level. The newspaperman is advocating a national educational program which, if possible at all, would cost well in excess of ten billion dollars annually. We salute Alsop's resolute refusal to choose between guns and butter, but the question remains: will even the richest country on earth simultaneously support the Vietnam war and a national MES program?

The MES requirement of 30 percent more schoolrooms raises yet another difficulty. So far in New York, only schools with underutilized facilities have taken part. But nationally the program would require many new schools; and Alsop would have them built deep within the ghetto. This would institutionalize racial segregation and seal Negro children in the ghetto for generations. Instead, new school construction must take the form of large complexes, such as campus parks, which draw upon wide attendance areas, guarantee quality education, and maximize desegregation.

Why Interracial Schooling?

But to dwell on costs and construction would be to allow ourselves to be deflected from the fundamental sources of our disagreement with Alsop. Let us suppose that his facts are right, that we do have evidence that by spending \$1,263 per child we could raise the reading scores of ghetto children to the level of those of suburban children. This would indeed signify equality of educational opportunity, and it would be a distinct improvement over what we now have. But would this fulfill the primary aims of a public school system in a multiracial society? Reduced to its simplest terms, our belief is that interracial contact is an essential component of quality education, that schools which are isolated by virtue of race, social class, or religion deprive their students of adequate preparation for a

diverse society and world.

We don't want to fall into the trap of seeming to assert that integrated education is by definition good education; obviously, the mere presence of whites and Negroes in the same classroom is no guarantee of anything. But when we compare the findings of the Coleman and Civil Rights Commission reports with those of such compensatory programs as the More Effective Schools, we must conclude that the evidence suggests that minority group students perform better in integrated than in isolated settings.

Are the reasons for this so hard to discern? To quote again from the Krevisky report of Alsop's visit to the MES schools:

"The teachers stressed that neither MES nor other programs have yet succeeded in overcoming the sense of hopelessness in the community, and the powerful barriers to incentives posed by discrimination in housing and jobs. . . ."

Unless we are willing to change the fundamental realities of ghetto life in America, aren't we deceiving ourselves to think that any amount of money can buy quality segregated education?

Let there be no misunderstanding. We believe MES and other dedicated remedial programs are necessary efforts at this desperate juncture in American race relations. But they constitute neither a national model nor a permanent solution. At best, they buy time until racial desegregation becomes a widespread fact of American public schools. Full desegregation must be the goal, and all efforts, including MES, must point toward it. Indeed, MES was originally conceived in this spirit, as the May 1964 program description made clear on its first page. And Alsop encountered on his hurried visit the same position from MES teachers:

". . . the teachers, mostly experienced and mostly Negro, sharply disagreed with Alsop's line. They refused adamantly to accept the solution of quality segregated education and questioned him insistently on what he was doing to educate white people to accept Negroes trying to break out of the 'ghetto'. They sharply challenged a statement he made that education was the only key to integration - by elevating the abilities of the Negro people, and leading to their acceptance by the white community." (*The Center Forum*, July 5.)

We agree with Mr. Alsop that "it is always wicked to hold out false hopes and offer fake panaceas to those in desperate need of hope and help." But even the best funded and most dedicated "compensatory" ghetto program is just such a "false hope" and "fake panacea" if it is advanced as a "complete victory."