



The Presidency: Too Soon to Love Again

By Priscilla McMillan

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Presidential politics, for many of us, has become an area of life cordoned off by shock, grief and pain. Again and again in the past decade we have been touched and wounded by the political process as we had not been wounded before. It is not indifference but the numbness of mourning that lies behind the apparent apathy observers have noticed during the election campaign.

It goes back to President John F. Kennedy whose political and family life were brought extraordinarily close to us on TV. On that terrible day in Dallas nine years ago his death, too, was brought extraordinarily close.

Many Americans simply have not recovered. Even the moguls of TV, men not noted for their sensitivity, seem to recognize this for they seldom show a long film clip of John F. Kennedy in action. They realize that it is still too painful, that the process of mourning is incomplete, that our sorrow is not yet spent.

Not only our apathy, but some of the cynicism the pundits have noticed this year goes back to the murder of J.F.K. For what did his assassination do but stop the political process dead in its tracks, short-circuit democracy

were trying, however, to wrest back that control over events that we lost.

It will be hard for Americans to recover. Meanwhile, we are paying the price: the loss of our hope about leadership and a failure to invest the best of our energies and emotions in national politics.

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by substituting the will of a single madman for that of a nation? Of what value is a system geared to expression of the popular will if the workings of that will can be wiped out in a second?

We still were struggling with our guilt and grief and with political questions raised by the assassination when, five years later, we had to face it again, first with the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King and then that of Robert F. Kennedy. And this year, just as the campaign was warming up, we were reminded of the shock and horror all over again by the nearly fatal shooting of Governor Wallace of Alabama.

Is it any wonder that some of us were tempted to plunge into campaigning this year, tempted to get hopeful about national politics once again, only to draw back out of a dimly perceived need for self-protection? It is not that we have grown morally callous, as the pundits say, or that we have been manipulated into insensibility. It is simply that we want to put some emotional distance between ourselves and the political scene, charged as it now is with feelings of anxiety and pain.

Among politicians, the first to un-

Christand was Eugene McCarthy who
before the murders of 1968, was
campaigning with cool and telling us
we ought to expect less of the office
of a President. It was a message we
wanted to hear. The fewer our emo-
tions we expect after all the less we
stand to be hurt.

But the great beneficiary has been
Richard M. Nixon. For some people it
is a protection to have a President
they do not love or even like. Gary
Hart, a Senator, McGovern's campaign
manager, has commented that support
for Nixon is like a hole wide and an
inch deep. An inch deep is
all that many Americans want to
hold him now.

We are told that Mr. Nixon needs to
take himself to conserve his emo-
tional energy and limit his contacts
with people. Accordingly, he seldom
addresses the public in person and has
held only a few press conferences than
any President in modern times. By
staying out of sight by tailoring his
speeches to his office in his pocket, Pres-
ident Nixon may be meeting our needs
well. His low visibility which would
have been accounted a failure of
leadership in other times, may be an
accidental stroke of genius for now.

The fact that we have not finished
mourning, have not settled our ac-
counts over the death of John and
Robert Kennedy, has implications for
Edward Kennedy's fate. Should he
run for President he and we will have
to deal not with the question about
how long it will be a matter of un-
resolved emotions about his brothers.
This was apparent three years ago
when Kennedy drove off a bridge on
Chappaquiddick Island and had trou-
ble accounting for his actions in the
hours immediately afterward. The
public leaped on him. They
said he was "politically dead." In
fact they said, and the way they said
it, there was something savage, some-
thing like triumph or relief.

When we were engaged in that year,
was the symbolic murder of Edward
Kennedy. We were killing him and
we were in that way we could spare
ourselves the horror of yet another
real life Kennedy assassination. By tak-
ing matters into our own hands, we