Violence: Conspiratorial Pattern?

By RAY LINCOLN

Violence. It has been, for New Orleanians, mostly a hidden phenomenon, whose occasional terrifying visibility was always an aberration, a departure from the tranquil norm.

Shaken by the near-unbelievable reality of what happened here yesterday, and the events of recent weeks, the populace of this "city that care forgot" must be wondering uneasily how much of the death and destruction is random, and how much interlocks into an ugly, repetitive pattern.

Phrases like "reign of terror" are perhaps being whispered by people who for years have looked upon teeming cities of the North and West as the tinderboxes of urban unrest. Now, they fear, New Orleans' time may have come.

It is all speculation, and even if the violence of past weeks is indeed a conspiratorial pattern, it may not be symptomatic of anything widespread or lasting. But the speculation is gathering more and more fuel:

—Nov. 29, 1972 — A spectacular blaze breaks out on the 15th and 16th floors of the Rault Center in downtown New Orleans, well out of reach of conventional firefighting equipment. Five women jump several stories from the inferno of a flame-choked room in full view of hundreds of horrified spectators.

Four of the women, plus a man who succumbs to smoke inhalation, die as a result of that fire, which is probably the work of an arsonist, according to an official report just released.

— Dec. 31, 1972 — A 19-year-old police cadet, Alfred Harrell, is gunned to death near Central Lockup by a sniper or snipers, and accurate long-range fire also wounds another policeman at Harrell's side and a third who moments later is investigating a nearby burglary.

Police Supt. Clarence B. Giarrusso attributes the attacks to a "well planned" assassination and points to "overtones of a militant group." A police spokesman says the incident represents the first time in memory for a sniper attack executed "for no apparent cause except to deliberately seek to kill police officers."

— Jan. 1, 1973 — Fires destroy two warehoues, one on Tchoupitoulas Street and the other two blocks away on Magazine. Fire officials indicate the fires started within two hours of each other and cite the strong possibility they were set deliberately.

AND THEN yesterday.

The arson-sniper attack at the Howard Johnson's also fits, coincidentally or not, into a series of fatal fires that have shocked New Orleanians for the past year and a half, the first of which ironically occurred at the same luxury high-rise motor hotel across the street from City Hall.

Six persons died in that fire on July 23, 1971, as flames and smoke poured through the 12th floor of the motel and sent panic-stricken guests onto balconies, many of them threatening to jump. The deaths were attributed to smoke inhalation. A subsequent grand jury investigation could not establish whether arson was involved, but the suspicion lingered.

On Christmas Day, 1971, three firemen lost their lives when a burning row of abondoned buildings collapsed on them. Thirteen other firefighters were injured.

Other, non-fatal fires in recent years have added to the toll of damage, notably the huge $2 million Jackson Brewing Co. fire on Feb. 6, 1971 and a 1966 blaze at the Monteleone Hotel which threatened 800 guests.