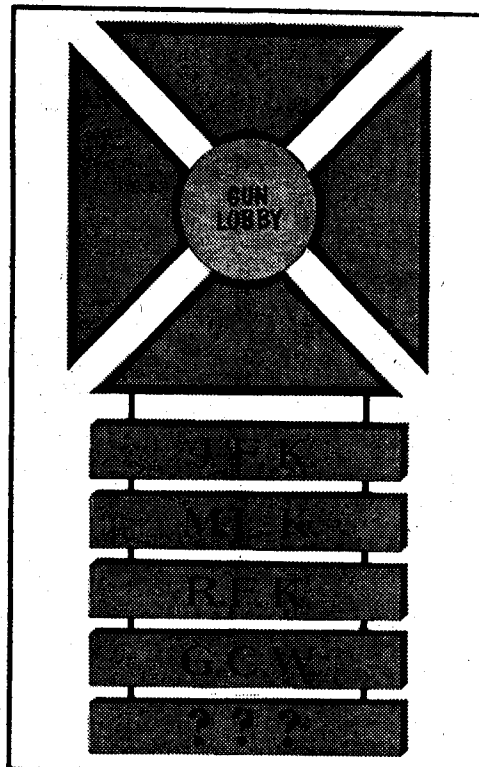


The Violence of The Dispossessed

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By Ben King and Bert Walker

THE TENDENCY to regard the attempted assassination of George Wallace as a senseless act may obscure its important lessons. The attack may not have been rational, but even irrational acts have meaning. Behind this particular irrational act are two disturbing truths about American life: First, large numbers of powerless individuals cannot exist in a culture of violence without deadly effect and, second, we have reached an impasse between the democratic process as we know it and America's culture of violence.

As a result of the attack on Gov. Wallace, some well-meaning Americans apparently are prepared to put the democratic process at the service of violence and irrationality rather than to address the deeper problem. Some suggest that campaigning be confined to "closed halls," with the audience passing metal detectors on the way in. Direct contact between candidate and voter, long regarded as a sacred American tradition, must now be abandoned, they say.

When an individual under stress refuses to recognize and deal with an important factor in his distress, we speak of a psychic mechanism called denial. To suggest that recent assassinations have merely been meaningless, irrational acts and that the only way to prevent them is to surround leaders with bullet-proof glass and cut them off from the people is an instance of the denial mechanism at work.

It is, of course, practically impossible to give political leaders absolute security. No politician would permit it in any event, as President Nixon demonstrated the day after the attack on Wallace by deliberately plunging into a crowd of tourists. But apart from these realities, Americans must now begin to wonder when pillars of the establishment call for ever-tighter security rather than basic remedial action.

Those who cast suspicion on the suggestion that there is something wrong with America are doing the nation a disservice. No amount of exhortation to "talk about what is *right* with America" can erase the image of our political leaders lying in pools of blood with sobbing wives bending over them.

The National Pathology

IF WE ASSUME that there are a certain number of madmen at large in the world, then it is difficult to explain why other democratic countries do not seem to have this problem. As the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (the Eisenhower Commission) noted: "In comparison to the other nations of the world, the level of assassination in

the United States is high. It is still high when the comparison is limited to other countries with large populations or other Western democracies . . . Almost alone among the nations with the highest level of economic development and the greatest degree of political freedom the United States has a high assassination rate."

Even totalitarian nations—where it might be assumed that increased motive might compensate for the reduced opportunity afforded by leaders who do not dive into crowds to "press the flesh"—do not seem plagued by this evil. It seems to be rampant in America at this point in our history because of the intersection of two processes, one personal—the frustration of the powerless that arises from our idealization of "the winner"—and the other historic—the persistence of the cult of the gun.

Within nations as within individuals, benign and malignant processes are

constantly at work. Maladjustments in character can exist in nations as in individuals. Usually these maladjustments are controlled and balanced by countervailing forces. In people, when they are not balanced and controlled we tend to call the result pathological. Rather than wall off the reality by dismissing it as individual madness—although individual pathology certainly may be a significant factor in all of these cases—should we not examine the deeper process, the national pathology? Is it not time to address ourselves to the underlying disease of which these unpredictable and painful crises are the outward expressions? Should we not ask ourselves whether we as a people have not permitted the malignant elements in our natures to prevail by continuing to accept a culture of violence that honors the use of force on both the individual and national levels?

"A Good Country"

ONE CAN STILL believe that, as President Nixon has said, "this is a good country," and yet recognize the fact that we are not a peaceful people.

We came to virgin shores and hacked settlements out of a hostile wilderness. We fought for our independence and fought again to maintain it. We fought Indians and Mexicans on the frontier to fulfill our "manifest destiny." We fought a bitter civil war, the consequences of which are still with us after 100 years. We fought in the mines and factories and on the rail roads for the right of work-

ers to organize. We fought to "make the world safe for democracy" and to preserve it from fascism. We fight today to "preserve the freedom" of those whose devotion to it is less clear than our own.

There is much in this record that is honorable, some that is dishonorable. But overall it is a record of a people in struggle. The political assassinations that have so shocked the nation over the last decade have occurred in the climate of a society that, while it may define itself as "peace-loving," has historically accepted the resolution of conflict by violent means.

Further, we have always valued and rewarded the fighting spirit, on the football field and in the political

arena. We have honored the "doer" rather than the man of contemplation, the winner rather than the man who may have played the game well but who didn't make it. We have idealized the frontier mentality.

The Rage of Impotence

THE SECOND ELEMENT of the national pathology is the rage of impotence that was responsible for three of the six major attacks of recent years. It killed John and Robert Kennedy and crippled George Wallace. (Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and George Lincoln Rockwell were assassinated for somewhat different reasons.)

The bullets shot by Bremer, Sirhan and Oswald are an expression of the frustration of powerlessness of those who feel themselves cut off from any effective control over their lives. Each of these pathetic non-winners acted with the classic motivation of the lone assassin, to compensate for his own impotence by sharing in the power—by destroying it—of an expressive, charismatic figure. Each sought to give significance and importance to a meaningless existence. Ironically, the very constituency George Wallace was trying to mobilize, the forgotten men, the non-achievers, the left-behind little people, is grotesquely represented by his would-be assassin.

There are in America today large and increasing numbers of alienated, powerless people with no stake in the system, no investment in its future. The urban poor make up only part of this mass. Many others are essentially the innocent castoffs of a highly developed technological society, agricultural workers displaced by mechanization, blue-collar workers stifled by repetitive, unsatisfying jobs. They are the products not only of our neglect but of the increasing demands of a machine society that has left little room for the non-achiever. In our emphasis on the external environment, on productivity, on increases in gross national product, we have failed to provide for an inner meaning that can assure that people find some satisfaction in their work and in the quality of their lives and that they feel some sense of participation, of ability to make an impact

on the forces that determine their destinies.

A growing mass of men and women, for various intellectual, physical or emotional reasons, are incapable of "achievement" in the particular way that our society defines achievement.

In an older and less crowded America, the son who didn't make it might have sought his fortune in the West. In a simpler America, he might have devoted himself to a craft. But today there is scarcely any room for him.

If he is a factory worker or a policeman trapped in the system, he has nowhere to go but home to the television with a six-pack. His chief hope left is a better life for his children through quality education, and even this many now see as threatened by busing. If he is a middle-level business executive, he despairs when he realizes he will never rise to the top. And because he is repeatedly told that there is little value in being second-best, he may have started to drink excessively. If his children are hustlers and "A" students, they possibly have gone on to Harvard. If they are not, they may have dropped out and joined a commune, which at least affords them some sense of participation, of value, of community in microcosm.

Shooting Out Of Love

IT IS NO COINCIDENCE that skyjackings and attacks on political figures are committed by the same types of individuals and that both acts resist solution by any feasible law enforcement procedures. If we exclude politically motivated acts by Arab guerrilla groups, we can see that skyjackers usually come from that same psychological rock-bottom of society as those who strike at political leaders. They are the dispossessed. They do not care about their own lives or the lives of others. They feel utterly powerless, and the airplane is an enormous symbol of power and of the technology that overwhelms. So they seize it and make it their own, with little or no thought that at some point, inevitably, the adventure will be over.

Seen in this context, it is not at all surprising that George Wallace should have been gunned down by one who apparently had been an admirer. Such a disaffected, powerless individual, a

man who, as one newspaper put it, was "at the end of his rope," might well have struck at Wallace not out of hatred but out of love, out of longing to participate in Wallace's power and authority. Ironically, that power and authority are made even more attractive and appealing by the very accouterments that are supposed to protect the candidate—speeding cars with screeching sirens, bands of Secret Service agents, a bullet-proof speaker's podium. Unable to have any effect on the world around him or on other people, the disaffected soul so desperately longs to be noticed, to be part of that impressive drama—"Hey, George! Hey, George! Come over here! Come over here!"—that he leaps onto the stage and enters the action.

Sick? Of course. But it can hardly be denied that the society in which we live provides to such unfortunate persons a pattern for working out their psychoses, a pattern that we, perhaps partly unwillingly, approve and admire. The cult of "D. B. Cooper—the song, the sweatshirts—that appeared on the West Coast after the first successful parachute skyjacking is a demonstration of the idealization both of the winner and of the successful violent act.

The Culture Of Violence

IMPOTENCE IN SMALL nations, it appears, is better tolerated. Few small and powerless nations commit national suicide with one mad act. On the individual level, however, particularly in America, the man who cannot live with his powerlessness and frustration strikes out. The American misfit with a potential for violence is reinforced by the elements of the culture of violence all around him, particularly in movies and on TV. Examples

are endless: "Gunsmoke," "The Untouchables," "Bonnie and Clyde," "A Clockwork Orange." "The Godfather" promises—or should we say threatens—to become the biggest money-maker in the history of the movies. While science has been unable to show a cause-and-effect relationship between violence on film and TV and individual acts of violence, movies and TV do offer constant support to the climate that nurtures men like Bremer, Sirhan, and Oswald.

If, as so many have said in recent days, America can tolerate no more of this, then we must look not to palliatives, but to careful diagnosis and therapeutic programs. There are elements of sickness within American society, and they are constantly contending with elements of health. We need to control the elements of sickness and support the healing process.

The impasse between our democratic processes and the persistence of the culture of violence cannot be resolved in favor of violence. Rather, it must be recognized that our democratic system requires that a political candidate be able to take his case to the people directly, not only on television and behind bullet-proof glass, but on street corners and even in shopping centers. An open, participatory democratic system requires a high level of political maturity and the kind of civility and civic respect that can never be instilled by law enforcement alone. We must, as a nation, now understand that the martial spirit that built America when it was a struggling young nation in the wilderness is not an appropriate spirit for an impacted, interdependent, 20th Century society. We need to replace the culture of violence with a culture of accommodation.

Nations, like individuals, can change and grow from experience. We need,

first of all, to reduce our obsession with the gun and with the winner. Although 21,000 Americans die every year by gunfire, Congress continues to refuse to control handguns, which were created for shooting people. The Wall Street Journal estimates that a new handgun is sold in America every 24 seconds. But there are hopeful signs. According to an April, 1972, Gallup poll, 79 per cent of Americans favor requiring a police permit before a gun can be purchased. Americans should be outraged if Congress still fails to act on gun control legislation and the President still fails to use his leadership to this end.

The Happy Losers

THERE ARE ALSO some indications that Americans, particularly younger Americans, are becoming less obsessed with winning, with being "number one." A Trendex poll in November, 1971, indicated that more than 30 per cent of Americans felt that, as a general concept, the idea that America had to be first in the world in everything was not valid. Over 39 per cent of those in their 20s held this view. Unfortunately, President Nixon has decried this tendency as "defeatism and self-doubt," which, he claims, is chipping away at the "moral strength" of the nation. Can we not ask what price the nation is to pay for sustaining this particular definition of "moral strength?"

To make a place for those who are now regarded as losers, we must re-humanize patterns of work and the American lifestyle. This, to be sure, is no small task, and much of it is beyond the power of government. But we must nonetheless strive for these changes. We hear repeated accounts of the failure of increased financial incentives to motivate the assembly-line man whose job it is to tighten screws on a metal plate 480 times a day. We read of high absenteeism among younger workers, some of whom regularly show up only four days a week and, when asked why, respond that they cannot make enough money in three. We need new concepts and patterns of work that will allow people to find satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment in their daily jobs.

George Santayana once said that a

nation that could find no satisfying place for its least gifted citizens deserved to be remembered no more than the sands of the sea. A basic failing of the Marxist approach is that communism's preoccupation with material goods for sharing is actually no advance over capitalism's preoccupation with material goods for profit.

Finally, we need a further opening of the political process and the corridors to power so that people have a sense of participating and affecting, if only in a small way, the forces that control their lives. Ironically, what we do not need is an increase in the distance between the political leaders and the people, as has been suggested in the wake of the attack on Gov. Wallace. Rather, we need to bring them closer together. There was much psychological insight in Sen. Eugene McCarthy's 1968 "campaign promise" to take down the fence around the White House.

When the human body suffers a massive wound, it either expires or it resists, adapts, adjusts and survives. When the human mind sustains a traumatic shock, it is either destroyed or it accommodates, resolves and incorporates the experience as learning and survives. The process is not so very different for the national body that is all of us.