

That Time We Huddled Together

By Priscilla McMillan



FROGMORE, S. C. — The Warren Commission said it all nine years ago: Lee Harvey Oswald killed President Kennedy and did it alone. The commission's report, the most completely documented story of a crime ever put together, has been challenged, but its mountain of positive evidence has never been refuted.

Yet many if not most Americans still believe after ten years that there is more to the Kennedy assassination than that, that Oswald did not do it alone, or that somebody else killed Kennedy. There are a host of outlandish conspiracy theories, any of which contradict each other, and yet

many rational people continue not only to believe but passionately to defend them.

Why? The answer of course is in the emotions, in the deeper, the still unsettled feelings most Americans have about that traumatic event in Dallas.

And once these feelings are examined—and conspiracy theories put behind—a startling truth appears. This truth is that the unresolved residue of emotion Americans have about President Kennedy's death comes from the same deep psychological recesses as the emotions which are creating at least some of the doubts about impeaching President Nixon.

In psychological terms, the Kennedy assassination and the Nixon impeachment are nothing more than paraphrases of each other.

The phenomenon at the heart of each is parricide, the murder of the father by the son.

Freud said that parricide was "the primal crime of humanity." According to psychoanalytic interpretation, the son, yearning deep in the unconscious to possess his mother, desires to kill his father, to dispossess him from his mother by force, by murder if necessary. Fearful that the father, who is

bigger and more powerful, will punish him by castration, the son represses the wish to kill, and, in the Freudian and other widely accepted interpretations, it is this act of repression that lies at the heart of all neuroses.

The assassination of President Kennedy was a parricide, an enactment in the political arena of the ancient drama, Oswald, it is true, lacked a father. His mother was father and mother both. Yet in spite of the incompleteness of the family circle, Oswald had the Oedipal emotions. Like most people, and all neurotics, he failed to resolve them. But, unlike most, he chose to enact the unresolved part of the drama—violently. Feelings that were originally confined within his family were displaced outward, into politics, against the father of the country, To Oswald, and to the rest of us, the emotional significance of the deed was that of parricide.

Twisted though they were, the feelings that were in Oswald are in us all. Because he is so relentlessly visible, the President is alive in our emotions. He awakens the keenest memories and feelings. President Kennedy's attractiveness, his charm spread over us like a mantle, made the feelings he evoked more poignant still. We hold

onto conspiracy theories because they are a defense, a screen, a barrier, against having to accept those feelings in ourselves.

The suspiciously irrational feature of our behavior toward the impeachment of President Nixon is that here again we are demanding more evidence of guilt when the evidence already is overwhelming. There are legal and political reasons, of course. The accusations of crimes require careful proof. But there seem to be emotional reasons, too. The demand for more and more evidence is a blind, an obstacle we are raising to escape the truth of our own emotions.

Today it is we who are challenged to be the executioners. The rifle and the bullet are missing, but the feelings underneath are the same: the primal wish to kill the father, guilt and horror over this and, at last, a desire to protect him, to keep him in his place after all.

And so, like Hamlet, whipsawed by conflicting emotions of desire to avenge his father's death and guilt at having desired that very death, we hesitate.

Priscilla McMillan is writing a book on the Kennedy assassination.

in Disbelief