



Pete Hamill

TEN YEARS GONE

Another Thanksgiving, and 10 years gone. Ten years since the shots ripped through the sunshine in Dealey Plaza, and blew a hole through America. Ten years since grace was murdered, since style and wit and youth went out of the country, to be replaced by demons, gargoyles, slimy agents of the debased, a river of night conceived by Hieronymus Bosch. The bullets maimed the brightness and brought America down into the strangled old age of decline and death. Another Thanksgiving, and 10 years gone.

Dallas broke the American dike. Waiting beyond, murmurous, blood-swollen, wormy with righteousness and deceit, lay the tar-black river of American darkness. It came upon us with a thunderous rush. A half-million Vietnamese dead, 55,000 dead Americans, 200,000 maimed and mutilated, a matching number stumbling through the junkie's night. Crazy generals faked their murderous numbers; young men were machine-gunned in jungles; apple pie boys entered My Lai and a hundred other places and shot down old men and babies. The blood of Dallas filled the ditches of Vietnam. Another Thanksgiving, and 10 years gone.

* * *

Across the country, slaughter became commonplace. The dike was broken, and the river contained Richard Speck, his knife slicing nurses in Chicago; Charles Whitman carrying his rifle to the tower in Austin; Charles Manson's savage family crawling through the bushes in California, to

rip and destroy. The numbers escalated. How many people was Juan Corona convicted of killing? How many damaged boys were pulled from the sand of Houston and Galveston? Three young crazies killed 19 people in California, and it is a two-day story in the newspapers. In New York, 2000 are killed every year: throats cut, bullets pumped crazily into bodies, babies hurled from windows, wives mutilated, bodies chopped to pieces, and slush-eyed killers captured in the dawn, silent and American. We live in barbarism.

Ten years gone, and who remembers the dead of Watts, or Newark, or Hough, or East Harlem? Americans shot down Americans at Kent State and Jackson State. An American traveling in Europe would create shudders; his nation was a nation of killers, people whose symbol had become the B-52, dropping bombs on hospitals, while its President debased the language with talk about honor, peace, and freedom.

Assassination became part of our politics. There would have been no way for Richard Nixon to become President without the murders of John and Robert Kennedy. His great "come-back" was the product of the spilled blood of superior men. John F. Kennedy gunned down, Robert Kennedy murdered, Malcolm X assassinated, Martin Luther King falling before the assassin's rifle: and emerging from the ashes, a figure who epitomized the self-contempt of a disturbed nation, came Richard Milhous Nixon.

Another Thanksgiving and 10 years gone. Gangs in the South Bronx drag 13-year-old girls away and rape them repeatedly. Nixon is on TV, shouting to America: "I'm not a crook!" And adding that it might not be bad if Air Force One crashes, because "then they wouldn't have to impeach."

I know all that was wrong with the Kennedy Administration; how Kennedy was a cold warrior, how the Bay of Pigs set up a lot of other criminal acts; how the first steps into Vietnam came under Kennedy; how it was Kennedy who hired Johnson, Rusk, MacNamara, Bundy, Rostow and the others. I know that Kennedy was timid in confronting Congress over civil rights and poverty, and that he did not do what he really could have done during his thousand days.

* * *

But, hey, wow, did I feel better about being an American when John F. Kennedy was President. His press conferences were fine things to watch, full of irony and wit, and the spontaneity of a confident man. He was comfortable in his body, and made all who watched him feel more graceful, more full of possibility, somehow glad to be around, in America, in a time of ascendancy.

It could not last. The darkness came up and overwhelmed the day. Debased, empty men now rule the nation; the Congress swoons in cowardice. Every day, Richard Nixon walks through our skulls, in his plodding mediocre style, defensive and dangerous, lashing out, pleading innocence, leader of the most corrupt administration in the nation's history. In the future, there is only more cowardice, debasement, lawlessness and murder. Another Thanksgiving, and 10 years gone. Excuse me if there is nothing this year for which to be thankful.