



Joseph Kraft

The War on Authority

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"WHY, OH WHY?" people ask about the recent outburst of political shootings that erupted last week in the tragic attack on George Wallace. But the answer lies right before our very eyes.

During the past decade, the country has been on a binge of unbridled self-expression. Every group, and virtually every person, has been staking claims that crack established supremacies and traditional restraints. Given an open season on authority, it is not surprising—it positively figures—that a few far-out loners would seek to assert themselves by gunning down famous political leaders.

In the nearly universal war on authority, young people are the obvious starting point. The new lifestyle they have invented includes a new kind of music, a new form of dress and hair style, different attitudes toward success. All this is supposed to be benign—a "greening of America," as Prof. Charles Reich put it.

But in fact the young assert their values in ways that are not benign. They undermine the chief restraint on Western society—the restraint of conformity, which is another way of saying respect for other people and their values. They are subversive of parental and school authority. And as their protests gain attention and concessions, other groups are encouraged to follow suit.

THE BLACKS are also an obvious case in point. Having suffered centuries of unfair treatment, and being now subject to undoubted prejudice, they have the strongest case of any group in the country for redress of grievances.

Maybe the only way to make the case is by assertions of blackism. But many of these assertions—soul food and black studies and Afros and dashikis—clash with respect for the opinions and tastes of the majority—which respect is itself disparaged as "Uncle Tomism." Moreover, demands for quotas in uni-

versities and jobs, not to mention the right to welfare, look like demands for special treatment to some whites—who are thus stimulated to push their own claims.

The celebration of ethnicity is one clear-cut result. Italians, Jews, Chicanos, Greeks, Slavs and the various orientals are now advertising their origins with a vengeance. And they are being egged on in this boastful

self-glorification by persons who should know much better—for example, Prof. Michael Novak in his book "The Unmeltable Ethnics."

For ethnic narcissism sets group against group in an invidious competition—a competition that has been particularly harmful to the blacks. It also saps another important restraint on behavior, another concept fostering respect for the majority. That is the concept now derided as "assimilation."

Nativism, an always latent form of intolerance in this country, inevitably grows in reaction. Because of the pressure of ethnic and black groups, the private bigotry that almost all of us feel in one way or another is now increasingly denied private expression in clubs, restricted residential areas and that sort of thing.

Driven from its private sanctuary, bigotry increasingly goes public. The ranks of the Birch Society and — it has to be said — the Wallace movement are filled with persons who are pleased to think they are only asserting their rights as Americans.

Finally, at the end of a list which is by no means exhaustive, let me add the women's liberation movement. It is easy to see why so many women kick against the present division of burdens and honors between the sexes.

But the underlining of

women's rights also cracks the cake of custom. It removes yet another restraint, and by that token gives further license to everybody's competitive claims for self-assertion.

MOST AMERICANS can find a place in this tumult of Meism. It is the genius of this pluralist country to offer a pluralism of ego satisfaction. But there are misfits cast adrift from normal participation in group life — persons unable to keep up with the dizzy pace of American life. These shattered beings find the means of self-expression in lonely acts of desperate destruction.

Lee Harvey Oswald, who killed President Kennedy, was one of these. So was James Earl Ray, who murdered Martin Luther King. So was Sirhan Sirhan, who assassinated Robert Kennedy. So was Arthur Bremer, who attempted to assassinate Gov. Wallace.

If this analysis is right, there is no sure remedy for

ending the outburst of political assassination attempts. A more stringent gun law might help, and I certainly favor it. Less permissive (or, as I would call it, more responsible) attitudes toward protest on the part of authorities in the home, the school, the factory, and the office might also be useful. So might less glorification of violence in the press and on television. Equally, shorter campaigns and less pressing of the flesh by candidates.

But at the bottom the great need is for a climate of self-restraint in the country at large, a more generalized temper of civility, a winding down of indignant assertion of rights. And that, I fear, is not soon about to happen.

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