



Max Lerner

THE LONERS

In a time of the assassins the striking thing about them is that they have been lonely men, wound up in their fantasy life as in a cocoon, breaking out of it to show the world and themselves that they are capable of the ultimate act, of becoming part of history. This was true of Oswald, of Sirhan, of Ray.

The personality portrait just emerging of Arthur Bremer—the accused assailant in the Wallace shooting—shows him also to be a loner, withdrawn, living most fully in the scattered fragments scribbled in notebooks found strewn over his apartment floor. The report that two books on Sirhan were found in Bremer's car will not mean much at his trial, but it offers some eerie speculations about psychological linkages.

Inevitably the Wallace shooting will send readers to Gerold Frank's book about another shooting—that of Martin Luther King—in "An American Death" (Doubleday). He has laid the ghost of the conspiracy theory of the killing, which dies hard but can't survive the proof he marshals that James Earl Ray did the killing alone and unaided.

The book is a manhunt story as well as a psychological profile. There is also a haunting description of the mystical communion that King had with his people, his bantering raillery and roughhousing with his close associates as a company of brothers, just before Ray's bullet struck him down.

The book should end the Ray story, put it away on library shelves where it belongs. For with all their intricate in-

genuity and their impact on history, these killers are also dull men who turn to violence as a way of breaking out of their prison of self, and don't deserve the attention they wrest from us.

They are sick minds, who in every case come out of a background of broken families, mean surroundings, fractures with the past. They move aimlessly among furnished rooms and motels.

There is nothing to hold their lives together and give them meaning, no strong affectional or sexual ties with others, no exhilarating community of purpose, no work they do well. Resentful of a world which treats them badly, they use their fantasy life to revenge themselves on it.

They feel surrounded by menacing forces, but they also feel certain that they share the secret knowledge of who controls the sinister levers of power. They turn this over in their minds, blurt it out to a friend or acquaintance, sometimes write it out to themselves in blurred repetitive notes.

They become obsessed with a man constantly in the news who seems a symbol of all the sinister forces. They stalk him in their minds, then stalk him in actuality until they hunt him down.

Obviously I don't intend this as a composite mental portrait of assailants so widely separated in their lives. But there are a few common elements—the brooding loneliness, the overwrought fantasy life, the paranoid obsessions, the stalking.

The sense that the world harbors con-

spiracies isn't the monopoly of these men. It is part of the wider social climate. Many people, feeling helpless and frustrated, try to find an equalizer for their frustrations by imputing some magical capacity to what "they" are plotting or planning, the "they" being government bureaucrats, unions, corporations, liberals, reactionaries, Communists, Wall Street, Washington, white supremacists, black radicals, Jews, Catholics, press and TV, long-haired hippies, the military-industrial complex.

Wallace himself, the victim of this climate of conspiracy, contributed to the climate by his speeches about the sinister forces hostile to the nation and to himself, and in part he drew his political strength from people who feel frustrated and surrounded.

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I am not saying that conspiracies can't and don't exist. We know differently from history. But thus far the evidence in all three of the political assassinations of the 1960s runs the other way. It seems monstrous that a single man—nut or crank or whatever—should be able to snuff out the talent and prospects of a public leader.

Yes, monstrous, but not unlikely; for it is exactly a President or presidential candidate or charismatic ethnic leader who draws the lightning bolts of hostility to himself. And the lightning feeds on sick minds as well as on healthy opposition and dissent.

Leaders will have to live with danger for a long time. Life cannot be immunized for them. But we can at least make a gun damned hard to get. And we can apply more resources to reaching the lonely and frozen people, thawing them by human warmth, bringing them out of the night of their fantasies into a real world, before their distortions become killers.