

Political assassins --

By Larry Finley

They are usually little men, the political assassins. Obscure men of minor consequence to the world who write a bit of history with a bullet.

They are usually men of vast, unfulfilled dreams, who find a moment of notoriety in the dying light of a leader's life.

John Kennedy, the President; Robert Kennedy, the brother; Martin Luther King, the dreamer; Medgar Evers, the marcher; Malcolm X, the separatist.

All were stopped during a decade of death, when bullets vetoed ballots and the kill overruled the cause.

Their deaths, like the attempted assassination of Gov. George Wallace, serve to remind a nation that the same powerful personalities that can draw out deep love and devotion also can fan hatred of equal intensity.

THE SUCCESS OF THE CHARISMATIC public figure in America has always been guarded by the knowledge that somewhere an unknown man with unknown reasons can end that career.

Four U.S. Presidents have been taken from office by the assassin — John Kennedy, William McKinley, James Garfield and Abraham Lincoln.

Attempts were made on the lives of Harry Truman, Franklin Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt and Andrew Jackson.

Since the turn of the century, murder attempts have been made on 33 Presidents, governors, congressmen and mayors.

After the deaths of Sen. Kennedy and Dr. King in 1968, our nation's leaders and the public demanded a reason.

Not satisfied with the simple reasoning that these were the acts of lone assassins, they demanded an autopsy, a psychoanalysis of the society that created such men.

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PROF. William J. Crotty was one of the men who searched for the answers as co-director of a report to President Lyndon B. Johnson's Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence.

"Our findings showed some pretty negative things," Crotty said. "The mood of the country has changed since President Kennedy's assassination.

"After his death, there was shock, tremendous shock and a feeling that it wouldn't happen again. When it did happen again, polls showed that the attitude of the people had changed. They still regarded assassination as an abhorrent thing, but they accepted it as a political possibility."

Some similarities in killings

Crotty said that an intensive survey of assassinations and attempts failed to turn up any easy answers, but it did reveal some similarities in the major U.S. assassinations, which may, or may not, apply to the Wallace shooting:

- With the exception of the Puerto Rican nationalists who attempted to kill President Truman in 1950, none of the assassins or would-be assassins acted for purely political reasons.

- Most of the assassins "experienced an absence or disruption of the normal family relationship between parent

lonely,

little men

and child," such as the absence of a parent during youth, or illegitimacy.

- "Almost all assassins were loners who had difficulty making friends of either sex, especially in lasting relationships with women," the committee found. (John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin, was the exception.)

- Most of the assassins showed some sort of mental instability that set them apart from what society would call "normal."

- In the year prior to each attempt, the assassins were unable to hold down a regular job.

An important similarity is that most assassins tended to identify strongly with a cause or movement, but were unable to successfully join in the movement.

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PROFESSOR Dr. Lawrence Z. Freedman believes that the assassin tries to kill because of an internal need rather than a political one.

"An assassination is a personal murder, a terribly intimate human encounter," Dr. Freedman said. "A murder in a culture like ours tends to be a projection onto an enormous stage of a hitherto obscure, marginal individual."

Dr. Freedman, a psychiatrist, pointed out in the violence report that the assassins "follow patterns which in other contexts would not only be approved but considered heroic."

If a husband kills his wife, he usually feels regret. But, an average man can become a soldier "to kill perfect strangers without remorse or regret, in the name of a cause. In this regard, the assassin resembles the patriot, not the typical murderer," the report states.

THE MURDER OR ATTEMPTED MURDER of any political figure as powerful as George Wallace is bound to have a deep effect on a sizable section of the population.

Of the political assassinations in the last 10 years, the death of President Kennedy had the greatest effect, not only because of his personal magnetism, but because he was the

head of the country and the symbolic political "father," in both senses of the word.

The 1968 Louis Harris poll on assassinations showed that 95 per cent of the people felt great sorrow at his death. Many were afraid, even more were angry.

The first predictable reaction to Wallace's attempted assassination will be great sorrow from a wide range of people, if his shooting follows the pattern of previous public reactions.

This, of course, will be modified by the fact that Wallace

was only a presidential candidate and that his following was more limited than someone such as President Kennedy.

Another predictable reaction will be "scape-goating," the search for someone to blame.

Many will suspect conspiracy

Even though a suspect has been arrested and charged with Wallace's shooting, a sizable portion of the population can be counted on to see the attempt as part of a greater "conspiracy."

The many unanswered questions left surrounding the death of President Kennedy have added to the public's distrust of "official explanations."

After President Kennedy's death, the Harris poll showed that a full 62 per cent of the population believed Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone.

As in the wake of the John Kennedy and the Robert Kennedy assassinations, Wallace's shooting also is bound to renew the cries for presidential campaigning via television, and for more security.

SEN. EDWARD KENNEDY OF MASSACHUSETTS, the remaining brother, reportedly receives as many as 15 death threats against his life each week.



J. Kennedy



R. Kennedy



King



Malcolm X

After President Kennedy's death, security measures for the President and presidential candidates were tightened tremendously.

But the American people demand their candidates be real. They want to hear them, see them, "press the flesh," brag to their grandchildren that they saw the candidate.

Crotty believes that a switch to campaign-by-television would be a mistake and a disservice to democracy.

"The emphasis is on TV," Crotty said. "But the problem is that many candidates who get on TV have little substance."

"It serves the politicians and the country for candidates to get out and find out what the people are thinking," Crotty said. "There's no way of eliminating the danger."

PERHAPS THE MOST FRIGHTENING RESULT of the assassination study came when the Harris poll researchers asked the public what they would be willing to do to stop a senator who was blocking "essential legislation."

Mist said they would be willing to picket; over a third said they would "boo" the senator.

One per cent of those questioned said they would "use a gun." One per cent of the population in a nation of 200 million equals 2 million people.