



James A. Wechsler

DISORGANIZED CRIME

A few moments before he was struck down, George C. Wallace was delivering what a correspondent called his standard campaign speech. There was heavy emphasis on "law and order," mingled with sarcastic reference to those he depicted as more concerned with criminal motivation than with the expansion of police power.

Listening to a rebroadcast of the address Tuesday night, one suspected that many of his followers would recall an aspect of prophecy as well as preachment in his words. Had he not just finished warning against the flabbiness of a "psychological" approach to crime when life vindicated his plea for a harder line?

But others must have found inescapable irony in the melancholy coincidence. For no one has alleged that Gov. Wallace was lacking in protection; four of his own state troopers supplemented the force of 12 Secret Service men and local police at the scene. Yet none of them could save him from an assailant bent on murder and presumably indifferent to the personal consequences of his act.

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The point is hardly offered as a conclusive (or triumphant) comment on the crisis confronting the rule of law in many parts of the nation. It is intended to suggest that too many political polemics on the issue are unresponsive to the aberrational factor involved in many desperate assaults. The questions too often obscured by simplistic sloganeering about "permissiveness" are whether the sickness is becoming more prevalent—even contagious—and whether we are making any real national headway in the quest for preventive medicine. A mental health budget may sometimes be more crucial than a police appropriation.

We scarcely have the full story about the 21-year-old youth captured after the shooting. There is apparently no intimation of serious doubt that it was he who fired the bullets. The sketchy personal details unfolded so far point to no coherent political design or any involvement in organized conspiracy. There is at least tentative basis for the assumption that he was, in the terminology of the news

reports, "deranged."

As in other notorious violence of the last decade, this becomes the curiously frightening overtone. Thus, after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, many quickly assumed that he was the target of an elaborate Birchite plot. While the tragedy would have been no less awesome, many would have deemed that a more "reasonable" script. Similarly there would have seemed cruel but plausible logic in Robert Kennedy's death at the hands of a racist mob.

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Perhaps the most persistent and tenacious survival of the conspiracy theory has surrounded the death of Martin Luther King. It is the subject of a brilliant, absorbing inquiry by Gerold Frank, who spent more than three years investigating the background of the King murder. His findings, just published in a volume called "An American Death" (Doubleday), will disappoint those who cling to the belief that Dr. King was the victim of a large-scale plot woven by the enemies of his dream. But Frank's massively-documented judgment is clear:

"What must be understood about James Earl Ray is that he is a man utterly alone who made up for his isolation from others by living in a private world of fantasies and, sadly, enacted one of them when he assassinated Dr. King. Were not Dr. King's death such a tragedy, Ray's escape from jail (in a bread-box), his picaresque adventures in this country, Canada, Mexico, Portugal and London during his nearly 15 months of freedom, his capture as he was about to board a plane to some never-never land of white mercenaries, his subsequent arrangements . . . would read like a bizarre satire made even more bizarre by Ray himself. And he was helped in this by what appeared to be the public's appetite for the Satanic, its belief in demonology, its morbid need to fear, its readiness to believe in evil forces at work in unpenetrable secrecy."

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It may be especially hard for some of Gov. Wallace's dedicated adherents to believe—if it proves to be the case—that he was gunned down by a brooding, disoriented "loner" rather than by an agent of the sinister, invisible interests against whom he so often inveighed. Such wanton, senseless crime is almost demeaning to its victim.

Nevertheless it is a recurrent fact of life, in a certain sense more ominous than conspiratorial killing, because its origins and nature are so elusive. That the deeds of the damned may be triggered to some degree by the violence of war—or by such seemingly planned cold-blooded killings as the Yablonski slayings—will be contended in many places. But it has become too smug a dogma.

Nor will the malignancies of the mind that afflict those who conceive murder in shabby, lonely rooms be cured by law-and-order manifestos; even rigid gun control is a minimal but not infallible protection.

The shooting in Laurel perversely and brutally dramatized the need for exactly the kind of raw, sensitive exploration of the private human condition that Gov. Wallace disparaged in the speech he had just delivered.

N.Y. POST 5/17/72