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Are There 'Manchurian Candidates' Among Us?

By Tom Tiede

WASHINGTON — (NEA) — While others in this city engage in the premature wonder of who the next president may be, lawyer Bernard Fensterwald, Jr. busies himself with the creepy question of who the next president may not be.

Fensterwald is one of these people who believe that there are strange and conspiratorial things about in the Republic, things that not even the high and the mighty can control.

His argument, simply, is that the last four presidential elections were decided by bullets not ballots.

Lyndon Johnson won in 1964 because John Kennedy was shot down in 1963; Richard Nixon won in 1968 because only Hubert Humphrey was available to the Democrats after Robert Kennedy's murder; and Nixon, who might have lost to a pair of opponents in 1972, again won handily when George Wallace's votes were interrupted by another exploding revolver.

Could it happen again? And who might the victim be? Fensterwald speculates privately, but not for the public record. He says only that the possibility should be of concern to America. He also says, tantalizingly or boorishly, depending on one's viewpoint, that "the federal government knows the truth; but isn't saying."

Bedecked in a bowtie, and smiling mysteriously from behind a pair of studious spectacles, Bernard Fensterwald has for his doubts lately been branded a nut.

Once anything but a controversy, Fensterwald was a Senate investigator for 10 years before changing to a profitable private law practice. But now, deeply embedded in the thought that America is keeping something horrible from its children, and founder of a group called The Committee to Investigate Assassinations, the attorney is thought of as weird. "I like him," says one old Senate chum, "but I'm afraid he's gone off the deep end."

The stand-off suspicion is quite natural. America has in recent times been too much subjected to the half-wit notions of quarter-wit entities. And where the "assassination conspiracy" theory is concerned, the subjection has seldom had wit at all.

Currently, as example, a member of George Wallace's staff is advancing the idea that Communists have unleashed "Manchurian Candidates" into American politics. The thinking is that people like Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan Sirhan and Arthur Bremer may have been "programmed to kill our great people."

Fensterwald, however, is not apparently cut from that cloth. His committee on assassinations is a roster of respected names and his printable views are reasonable. His feeling that the government deceives the public, for instance, is, post-Watergate, almost the establishment philosophy.

Furthermore, he does not see any assassination plot, as such, by either foreign or domestic powers; rather, he cautions us legitimately that "murder has in the past been a policy of the U.S. government" — thus, to simply look on government as haloed is at best unintellectual.

Fensterwald's wish is to reopen investigations into each of the last decade's four major assassinations. Since he represents one of the convicted assassins, James Earl Ray, his motives could be questioned if it weren't for the fact he joined the client long after he joined the small clamor for full disclosure.

He does not deny that each of the convicted (except his own client) is guilty; his motive is to prove they did not act alone. Says he: "I think what's at the bottom of it may dwarf Watergate. If people are shocked by Watergate, what we

may prove is one thousand times worse.

Fensterwald won't say just what it is he's trying to prove. But he wouldn't be surprised if the CIA was heavily involved in "the real story." He recounts the Washington gossip that Watergate plumber E. Howard Hunt was once a CIA man in Mexico City at the same time Lee Harvey Oswald was there visiting, and that Hunt later wrote a book calling John F. Kennedy a "traitor" at the Bay of Pigs.

Fensterwald also suggests that President Nixon profited handsomely from two assassination attempts, adding: "Do you know where Nixon was the day President Kennedy was shot? He was in Dallas, Texas."

It may be, as Henry Kissinger continues to insist, a sign of the poisonous national atmosphere that questions of governmental implications in murder as well as Watergate are given credence. Presumably, there is nothing to Fensterwald's theory but coincidence. Nonetheless, poisonous atmospheres do not dissipate without a fresh breeze: the time thus has come to investigate fully our assassination doubts.

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