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Kennedy's Death—Myths & Realities

"What has violence ever accomplished? What has it ever created? No martyr's cause has ever been stilled by his assassin's bullet. . . . Whenever we tear at the fabric of life which another man has painfully and clumsily woven for himself and his children, the whole nation is degraded. . . . There is another kind of violence, slower but just as deadly, destructive as the shot or the bomb in the night. This is the violence of institutions; indifference and inaction and slow decay. This is the violence that afflicts the poor, that poisons relations between men because their skin has different colors. . . . But we can perhaps remember—even if only for a time—that those who live with us are our brothers, that they share with us the same short movement of life, that they seek—as we do—nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and happiness, winning what satisfaction and fulfillment they can."

Robert F. Kennedy in Cleveland on April 5, the day following the assassination of Martin Luther King.

These reflections upon the murder of Senator Robert F. Kennedy are an effort to match the reality of regicide with the necessity for political mobilization. In times of crisis, Americans react with a sense of guilt by acclamation, and this guilt prompts us to respond to political assassination with moral outrage, not with action. The answer to terror, however, is not tears, but—in this case—the immediate restatement of the principles of legitimation upon which this nation is either to survive or to perish.

The myths already circulated by major political figures about the assassination of Senator Kennedy can be categorized into five types. The significance of the assassination compels an attempt to respond to these myths, not in the spirit of belligerence, but in an attempt to move us all beyond the state of shock.

FIRST MYTH: *Assassination has become a contagious and infectious American style.*

REALITY: While it is true that major political figures are periodically subjected to assassination attempts, these at-

tempts are usually restricted to the top leadership, and this has been constant throughout the century. Hardly a President has not had attempts on his life. More significantly, the murder of Senator Kennedy is only distantly related to earlier native efforts. When Sirhan Bishara Sirhan was captured, he said: "I did it for my country. I love my country." But this country turned out to be Jordan, not the United States. In his mind, apparently, there was a fevered, imaginary relationship between an adolescent experience of his, and Kennedy's acceptance of the principle of foreign aid for Israel. What is involved, therefore, is a *political* pathology more than a *psychopathology*. And although this prosaic fact may counter the demands of oracles and pundits for greater social controls, it shows the need to frame a response relevant to the role of prevalent ideologies of Middle East nationalism. Although the Jordanian ambassador may sincerely repudiate this assassination, the fact remains that the ideology promoting such an attempt remains intact. The blunt truth is that assassination is far more common in Middle East anti-politics than in United States politics.

SECOND MYTH: *The degree of violence has increased as the propensity to change has accelerated.*

REALITY: The propensity to violence is, unfortunately, far more constant than current rhetoric would have it. At least there is as much evidence that accelerated social change directs aggressive impulses into acceptable frameworks as there is that "social order" permits a greater degree of social cohesiveness. What is new has little to do with matters relating to "human nature," whatever that amorphous beast may turn out to be. Rather, the novel elements are, first, the incredibly easy access to weaponry of all sorts for all kinds of people; and the extent to which nonentities can become part of universal history by an act of regicide—an act linked to the

publicity provided for an event. Easy access to weapons plus total network coverage equals instant history. With weapons, impulsivities formerly bottled up or redirected along constructive lines can be quickly ventilated. Impulse is even given ideological support: One wing of the New Politics perceives of the role of the individual or the conspiratorial group in terms of tearing up established political continuities.

THIRD MYTH: *Madmen and criminal elements will always be able to avail themselves of weapons, and therefore any legislation against gun-toting penalizes only the innocent interested in self-protection.*

REALITY: Admittedly, laws against gun purchases, like laws against discrimination, will not result in the elimination of crime, any more than civil-rights legislation does away with racism. But there is no evidence that gun-toting is a basic human appetite. More important, laws would make purchases more difficult and registration-tightening would make tracking out ownership easier. Perhaps at the heart of the problem is not the lobbying of the National Rifle Association, but the fears of the police that laws against free distribution of weapons would eventually affect police departments—since the militarization of the police would also have to be curbed if any genuine enforcement is to be made possible. In short, legislation on gun registration is needed to develop the "Londonization" of the police, no less than the pacification of the civilian population.

FOURTH MYTH: *Since there is no evidence that there is a conspiracy in most political assassinations, as in the murder of Robert Kennedy, individual responsibility should be assigned; and when captured, the guilty person should be treated as demented or deranged.*

REALITY: There are several fallacies in this line of reasoning. A premature dismissal of possible conspiracies, at least as a starting point in explaining political murder, is absurd. Conspiracies are empirical events. One can have a conspiracy, in fact, without a theory of conspiracy to guide the search for the source of a crime. Further, conspiracies—when they do take place—are extremely difficult to detect or uncover. But again, this is a problem of empirics, not of assumptions. The idea that an assassination is an idiosyncratic matter, while perhaps reassuring to the general populace, returns the problem of regicide to the field of personal pathology. In a thoroughly unconvincing way, it

disposes of fanaticism that is linked to reinforced nationalist claims or ethnic affiliations. By broadening the interpretation of conspiracy, and by treating this attempt as having precisely such a collective source, the assassination of Senator Kennedy permits renewed efforts to obtain a Middle East settlement—just as the assassination of Martin Luther King clearly triggered settlements of labor disputes in Memphis and led the way for a more positive Congressional response to the Washington Poor Peoples' March. There is a pragmatic advantage in making the fewest possible assumptions about assassination attempts, but when assumptions are made, there is little justification and less payoff in choosing individual over collective modalities of explanation.

FIFTH MYTH: *The assassination attempts on men of stature, such as Senator Kennedy, drastically affect the course of history.*

REALITY: Let it be said that this myth is hard to combat or overcome directly. It is always difficult to assess the importance of an individual to the future course of historic events. Such an assessment entails an estimate of the degree to which individuals in politics are autonomous, or at least free to maneuver the ship of state as they wish. It is quite as difficult to judge how new events might change old leaders, no less than how old leaders might shape new events. But there is no need to become excessively metaphysical in such a discussion. Attention might simply be drawn to the fact that the same social and political problems exist in 1968 that existed at the time of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963. The war in Vietnam remains. Racial violence is increasing. On the other side, the thawing of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union has continued at roughly the same pace under President Johnson. This is not to deny that changes in substance as well as style are brought about by an assassination; it is to say that problems of social structure and historical determination remain intact. However important the role of leadership in political organization may be, the role of total populations is, after all, far greater and more pervasive. Politics in America is still a game of large numbers. No political assassination can alter that fact without destroying American democracy.

As there is guilt, so too there is guilt alleviation. And the basic form this has taken under the Johnson administration has been the commission. We get riot commissions in place of urban renewal;

crime commissions instead of full employment; and now a commission to investigate "violence in American life" in place of full political participation. It might be said that the candidacy of Robert F. Kennedy was dedicated to the overthrow of the bureaucratization and Washington-centered nature of current administration efforts. By a quirk of events, his death has led to a new commission—to the very phenomenon Kennedy found such an abomination. Sentimentality and brutality are first cousins—which is why they appear to coalesce so well in the present administrative "style."

The formation of a commission on violence only makes more remote a resolution of the political dilemmas besetting the American nation. These dilemmas have been eloquently spoken of in the Democratic primaries. In the remarkable showings of both Kennedy and McCarthy, it is no exaggeration to say that the vote against the war in Vietnam and against the mishandling of the present urban crisis indicate a full appreciation on the part of the electorate of both the nature of and the constraints upon violence. The formation of a commission can only have the effect of psychologizing and blunting the political nature of violence.

Throughout the California primaries it was clear that Kennedy's strength and survival depended upon a large outpouring of poor people and their spokesmen. Black Americans, Mexican-Americans, and the other ethnic and religious minorities that comprise a large segment of the California population demonstrated by their vote that Kennedy's tactic was also a principle. An estimated 80 percent of the Negro voters and 85 percent of the Mexican-American voters cast their ballots for Kennedy. Less than one week later, on Friday, June 7, at Saint Patrick's Cathedral in New York, these citizens with the same background—indeed, only the Puerto Ricans displaced the Mexicans with their presence—also cast their ballots symbolically. The remarkable gathering of hundreds of thousands of people through the night was more than a celebration of mystical martyrdom. Every man, woman, and child who placed his or her hand on the casket was registering a vote, a vote denied to them by the assassination.

Such a society has a great reservoir of political health and sophistication. That it is precisely this sector of society that must suffer the consequences of this latest political murder is made terrible by the knowledge that in this way the poor have been effectively disen-

franchised. The assassination creates a situation of political desocialization at the very moment when Kennedy for the minorities and McCarthy for the students and other disaffected citizens were revitalizing the very mainsprings of political socialization. In this sense the appointment of a commission on violence is a fruitless as well as a thankless task, since the very act of depoliticization is the source of further violence. The assassination of Robert Kennedy was an act of terrorism. To convert it into the basis for a feeling of collective guilt for increased violence is to ignore a basic fact of our times not only in the United States but throughout the world. Violence can and often is a political act, the first mature step beyond egotistic resolution of social problems. Terrorism is the very opposite and negation of violence, since it frustrates and makes impossible the fruits of these very activities.

In his own way, Kennedy not only supported but drew sustenance from the "participatory democracy" advocates. Leaders of social-protest movements, new agrarian unions, and community racial and ethnic societies formed an urban backbone for Kennedy with which to take on the "party regulars." There is no doubt that he was hardly the favorite politician of Washington insiders. His audacious attempt to use the mass media to break the stranglehold of locked-in party organization was not to be dismissed lightly. The attacks on the Kennedy wealth were in fact not a resentment of the economic "oligarchical" tendencies of this wealth, but a resentment of the populist goals to which this wealth was placed. The Kennedy "coalition" of urban poor, ethnic and racial minorities, and a section of college and university personnel made the Democratic Party the natural home for these people. The assassination has changed the alignments but not the needs. In this sense, populism must readjust its vision of the politicians—and estimate the short-run and long-run damage occasioned by Kennedy's death, and realize that organizational rather than charismatic channels may now be required.

Social scientists will feel a special loss, too, for Kennedy made use of social-science personnel and findings in areas extending from Latin American aid programs to urban rehabilitation and renewal. As he wrote to me on June 3, "I have always believed that it is crucial to be assisted by social scientists in their particular fields in forming domestic and foreign policy."

The urgency of the age demands a movement, not a monument; confrontation, not conformity. The time for demonstrations of public sorrow passes quickly—despite the monstrous fact that within two months our nation has lost two of its staunchest fighters against current policies guiding the war in Vietnam and the war in the ghettos at

home. It is now time to translate sentiments into politics. When all participate equally, the loss of a leader such as Robert F. Kennedy will be seen as the brutal price that men often pay in the struggle for a democratic society.

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