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RFK: Poll Reveals Shock and Concern

By LOUIS HARRIS

The assassination of Sen. Robert Kennedy shook the American people to the core. In polling which extended from Wednesday through Sunday evening, the Harris Survey recorded a shocked reaction to the tragic events.

Three main strands dominated the public thinking:

—Two out of every three expressed the feeling that "something was deeply wrong in America" for the assassination to take place. Back in March, even at the height of frustration over the war in Vietnam, this sense of "something deeply wrong" did not rise over the 39 per cent mark. Last week, 53 per cent expressed the view that "law enforcement has broken down and lawlessness has taken over."

—Real concern was expressed over the state of politics today. By 59 to 31 per cent, Americans felt that "our political system is falling when the President can't announce where he is going, for security reasons." By a comparable 57 to 34 per cent, the public held the view that "our political process has fallen apart when candidates can't campaign without fear of assassination."

—The people engaged in considerably more self-examination than they did when President John F. Kennedy was cut down by a sniper's bullets. Just after that assassination, the Harris Survey polled public opinion on a set of identical questions. The number of Americans who felt more "guilty about not doing more for tolerance," "more against discrimination" and "more for Negro rights" all rose more substantially last week than in 1963.

In the process of introspection, close to half the people poured out a flood of emotions and vows that they wanted to be "more considerate of other people's feelings" and "more understanding of people different from me." Roughly a third expressed a determination to "go into community affairs" and to feel "less personal hostility to candidates with whom they disagree."

As in 1963, a majority of the public said it felt "more patriotic" and more bitter against "ex-

tremist groups." Clearly, there was much feeling that America in a time of crisis should stand together.

However, it should be pointed out that the differences in reaction between 1963 and 1968 are not so large that sweeping majorities appear to have been personally moved to re-examine their own behavior. There is more guilt than solid resolution. There is more alarm than clear direction.

Undoubtedly, the American people are seeking some meaning for their own lives out of what otherwise seems to most as a series of senseless acts. There is a feeling that two outstanding brothers dedicated to public service should not have died in vain.

This sense of rededication to the principles of John and Robert Kennedy has been felt most deeply by Catholics in the past week. Many Catholics who live in northern industrial cities had identified themselves in the past as part of what has come to be known as "the white backlash," resisting black thrusts for further gains.

In contrast to Catholics was the reaction of that 13 per cent of the public which still stands opposed to strict gun control legislation (81 per cent now fa-

vor such laws). Those opposing gun control legislation saw virtually no personal meaning in Robert Kennedy's assassination. Fewer than one in five of them said they felt more guilty or felt more favorable toward extending Negro or minority rights.

No doubt the mood of shock will pass. How much of the remorse and the dedication to make America a more decent and safer place will continue, remains to be seen.

Here is one of the tables on which the above conclusions are based.

"As a result of the assassination of Sen. Kennedy, do you personally feel (more religious, and so forth) than you did before?"

PERSONAL REACTION TO ASSASSINATION		1968	1963
More against extremist groups	52%	55%	
More considerate of other people's feelings	51	39	
More patriotic	49	52	
More understanding of people different from me	44	x	
More against discrimination	37	30	
More for Negro rights	33	21	
More like going into community affairs	33	x	
More guilty about not doing more for tolerance	31	23	
Less personal hostility to candidates with whom I disagree	21	x	
More religious	25	34	
(x—not asked in 1963.)			