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Of Tyarannicide

Amid the rumors and suspicions and allegations that the Central Intelligence Agency, with the knowledge of American presidents, plotted or perpetrated the assassination of certain foreign heads of state, a number of commentators have questioned whether this kind of secret, "gunpoint diplomacy" is necessarily and always evil.

Calling it not murder but tyrannicide, columnist John P. Roche asks, "Would it have been unconstitutional, immoral and generally dreadful if some American intelligence agent had put a 30-caliber slug into Hitler's skull in, say, 1937?"

On the face of it, it might appear that the 20th century would have been a far happier one had someone dispatched Herr Hitler when he first raised Nazism's ugly head. The same could be said about Torquemada and the 15th century, or Genghis Khan and the 12th century.

The argument collapses, however, as soon as we consider the death of a leader like Abraham Lincoln. Yet his assassin fervently believed that he was ridding the world of a tyrant. The student who assassinated the Archduke of Austria in 1914 and precipitated the First World War no doubt thought of his act as heroic.

Of course, neither of these "tyrannicides," nor others which have dramatically altered history, was the official act of an organized government.

They were the work of fanatic individuals. Nevertheless, it would be perilous if we came to believe that even in the case of a Hitler we can set up a standard of morality for governments separate from that demanded of individuals in society.

Yes, it can be argued that it would have been a good thing if someone had killed Hitler in 1937. Perhaps Stalin, too. But what about Mussolini? and Franco? Once embarked on such a course, where would we stop?

Castro in 1962 or 1963 would not have changed the factors that brought him into power in the first place, any more than the assassination of President Diem of South Vietnam was of benefit to that tragic land. And as for Adolph Hitler, there were other, nonmurderous means of dealing with him in 1937, if world statesmen had had the guts to stand up to him.

One feature distinguishing the American political experiment from all others before it was that it provided a peaceful means for changing rulers. If we ever reach the point where we practice a different morality in our dealings with foreign nations that we practice at home, if we adopt "tyrannicide" as a valid, even if only a last-resort, method of furthering national policy, we will have assassinated all that is best in ourselves.