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Belief in Conspiracy Noted

National Trait, Says Historian

Did Lee Harvey Oswald act alone in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy?

Was James Earl Ray "helped" in the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King?

Millions of Americans believe both leaders were killed as a result of conspiracy. Why?

A Tulane University historian, and long-time student of political assassinations, thinks belief in conspiracy is a national trait.

"The American public loves speculation and mysteries," says Dr. Bennett H. Wall, "They are devoted to intrigue and believe in it as a way of life. They refuse to believe that even court processes can be complete."

Americans, as a result, tend to discredit instrumentalities of government that investigate or try assassins.

But this skepticism collapses when public regard turns to the victim of a major political assassination. A myth-making process takes hold, says Dr. Wall, and the fallen leader becomes a "folk hero of gigantic proportions."

"Failures are glossed over, successes magnified, and dull documents (relating to the leader's life and deeds) glitter when read with the eye of imagination. The new man thus created becomes the passionate multitude one who heralded better things.

"Throughout history men have romanced with the image

of greatness or near greatness in their heroes. When tragedy strikes the lives of such men, we immediately begin the myth-making process."

Dr. Wall, who is professor of history at Tulane, believes a full-scale legend has been woven about the accomplishments and leadership qualities of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, slain last year, are already becoming involved in the myth-making process, Dr. Wall adds.

Historical study of assassinations in America has led Dr. Wall to conclude that most of the leaders who were targets of assassins emerged in crisis periods of our history, and possessed great appeal for vast numbers of people.

Abraham Lincoln fits this description perfectly. So does Ulysses S. Grant, who, Dr. Wall notes, was on the list of persons to be assassinated when Lincoln was killed.

Another popular idol in troubled times was Theodore Roosevelt, who as an ex-president was shot and wounded while campaigning for the presidency on a third party ticket.

In the rock-bottom days of the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt, then president-elect, was the target of an assassin who shot at him, missed, and killed Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak, who was standing beside Roosevelt at a Miami political rally.

The two slain Kennedys and Martin Luther King also emerged as leaders in a time of crisis.

The assassins or would-be assassins of these men, says Dr. Wall, were in most cases persons "totally alienated from society if not psychotic. "Paradoxically while most of them were personal failures, they vented their hate on persons who offered promise of hope and success in a time of crisis."

American history is studded with political assassinations. But Dr. Wall says that in his studies of the subject he has come across almost "innumerable" examples that never made the history books — "a senator here, a congressman there; a governor here, a judge there — all considered too insignificant to be part of the history normally presented to the American public."

Considering this background of national violence, Dr. Wall wonders whether political murders may not multiply in days ahead:

"We live in a crisis society, and through communications, media, public figures are created instantly. These public figures offer hope of reconciling what could be tremendous splits and cleavages in the social order.



DR. BENNETT H. WALL Says American public loves speculation and mysteries.

"The same kind of personal warmth that attracts followers to these men is likely to attract the disoriented failures who see instant success for themselves, publicity-wise, through the assassination of these persons."

The Tulane historian fears there is real danger that violence and assassination may become common-place because American society "abounds with hordes of persons who are victims of the failures of society — educationally, culturally, and spiritually."