

ES, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 1969

Topics: Since Nov. 22, 1963

By THEODORE C. SORENSEN

Six long years ago today a mindless act of senseless violence robbed this nation of a dream and a promise.

When they killed him in his pity,

When they killed him in his prime . . .

They killed him in his kindness,

In their madness, in their blindness,

And they killed him from behind. . . .

—Herman Melville

Some expressed the hope then that the unspeakable tragedy of Dallas would bring this nation to its senses, awakening its instincts for compassion and curbing its appetite for violence. Instead, under the strain of a prolonged unpopular war and ugly racial tensions, the curse of violence has steadily spread across the land like a poisonous plague, taking the lives of a King and another Kennedy as well as countless others, converting campuses into battlefields, embittering black-white relations, and creating a climate of hatred and strife in which a Presidential commission warned this month that the risk of political assassinations is rising.

We have become so accustomed to turbulence that the

mere absence of violence in a mass demonstration or in a folk-rock festival is hailed as extraordinary. All too regularly public speakers are shouted down, professors are shoved around and police officers are issued "shoot to kill" orders. Virtually accepting the inevitability of lawless disorder in last week's March on Washington, spokesmen for both the Government and the Mobilization maneuvered in advance to place the blame for whatever happened upon each other.

Afterward one could almost sense the disappointment with which the Administration acknowledged that there had been no improper disruptions among the main body of marchers. Equally disappointed were those members of the radical fringe who had hoped police reaction might draw sympathetic youngsters into a bloody battle.

Street Confrontations

Are we then headed, as the National Violence Commission implicitly warned, toward a new era of internal convulsion, in which the politics of confrontation replaces the politics of hope and reason?

According to a recent poll, the vast majority of Americans opposes violence. But many of those same Americans support-

ed for the Presidency in 1968 a candidate whose most noted pledge was a threat to drive his car over prostrate protesters. Many liberals shrugged off the Chicago "police riot" as mere "over-reaction."

The same Congressmen who assail the television industry for providing brutal pictures of violence to the immature and the unstable knuckle under to the gun lobby's demands that the very tools of violence be easily available to all.

A Presidential aide is reported to oppose soft measures against students, adding: "We mustn't be afraid to get in there and crack a few heads." Sometimes our society seems very sick indeed.

But the peaceful conduct of last week's Mobilization in Washington offered some grounds for optimism. Hopefully those protesters interested in positive results are beginning to realize that violence on the California campuses only helped entrench Reagan, violence at the Chicago Convention only helped elect Nixon and violence in the nation's ghettos has spurred more white resistance than assistance on the legislative and economic front.

Peaceful political activities in the McCarthy and other cam-

paigns of 1968 were far more responsible for the de-escalation of our Vietnam involvement than the Weathermen, Yippies and Crazies.

Constructive Dissent

Peaceful protest can and should replace violence, but it can only happen in an open society. Those who refuse to hear or heed constructive dissent—be they presidents of a university or Presidents of the United States—are inviting protesters to go beyond mere dissent. Those who condemn needless violence committed in defiance of the law must not encourage needless violence committed in the name of the law, whether by institutional inaction or individual action. Suppression does not lead to safety, and repression only provokes further violence.

While on this sad anniversary we should all say an extra prayer for the safety of our President, this is also a day to renew J.F.K.'s undelivered vow at the Dallas Trade Mart to achieve "in our time and for all time the ancient vision of 'peace on earth, goodwill toward men.'"

Theodore C. Sorensen, an attorney, served as special counsel to President Kennedy.