

In The Nation: 'Awful Event'

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, June 5—In the dark night of the soul, Scott Fitzgerald wrote, it is always three o'clock in the morning; and when the news came to the East at that melancholy hour it truly seemed darker within than beyond the frightening windows.

Some sought compulsively for a collective response, a sort of national soul within which to weep, and Gene McCarthy spoke well for these.

"It is not enough, in my judgment," he said, "to say that this was the act of one deranged man, if that is the case. The nation, I think, bears too great a burden of guilt, really, for the kind of neglect which has allowed the disposition to grow here in one's own land, in part a reflection of violence which we have visited upon the rest of the world."

Later, in Resurrection City, Ralph Abernathy saw it as something worse than neglect of social needs. There was bound to be a conspiracy, he said in bitterness and sorrow, to eliminate the young leaders who sought justice for the down-

trodden, when in a short time Medgar Evers, John Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy had been struck down.

Out in Los Angeles, Charles Evers—who spent yesterday touring Watts for Bob Kennedy's Presidential campaign—put it a little more moderately, but no less bitterly. Anyone who spoke up for justice, he said, had to be prepared for death in a country like this.

When it became known that the young gunman was a Jordanian, the secretary-general of the Action Committee on American-Arab Relations immediately claimed this foul deed as a political act which—although deplorable—was nevertheless understandable.

In the Kennedy-McCarthy debate, Dr. Mohammad T. Mehdi said, Kennedy had supported the Israeli cause and "it is this disrespect for the human Arab person which brings about this kind of violence."

Whether the responsibility for the shooting lay with some disposition toward violence in the American soul, or upon a conspiracy against justice, or within a seething nationalist fervor, there was at least one obvious response, and Repre-

sentative Gerald Ford of Michigan offered it:

"Surely there can be no further quibbling about the urgent need for tougher law enforcement legislation."

It remains to be seen whether those who agree with this will be willing to include some practical limitation on the purchase and possession of the kind of handgun with which Robert Kennedy was so grievously wounded, or the cheap rifle that killed his brother.

Such limitations would not be necessary, of course, if there could be a favorable and universal response to President Johnson's prayer that "divisiveness and violence be driven from the hearts of men everywhere."

Such a rite of purification may not be expected. No more than the death of John Kennedy eradicated the murderous instincts of mankind will the shooting of Robert Kennedy still the bubbling, demonic brew of life; and the hand that felled him, whether that of zealot, lunatic or criminal, was finally the hand of Cain.

"Awful event" said the headline of The New York Times

above its story on the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. And in the dark night of the soul there are always awful events from which there is no escape in the collective soul, or anywhere else.

Meditating upon the fate of the Greeks at Thermopylae, the poet Cavafy peered through the blackness at the human condition:

Honor to those who in their lives
Are committed and guard
their Thermopylae.
Never stirring from duty;
Just and upright in all their
deeds,
But with pity and compassion,
too;
Generous whenever they are
rich, and when
They are poor, again a little
generous,
Again helping as much as
they are able;
Always speaking the truth,
But without rancor for those
who lie.
And they merit greater honor
When they foresee (and many
do foresee)
That ephialtes will finally
appear
And in the end the medes
will go through.

Observer: Nightmare Out of the Attic

By RUSSELL BAKER

WASHINGTON, June 5—This morning it was waking up to another installment in the American nightmare. It was a beautiful, sweet spring morning here with a breeze ruffling the maples and a hazy blue sky promising heat later, and there it was again, out in the open, first on the radio and then, because we have already acquired the habit of sharing it communally through pictures, on television.

It is strange how quickly we have become familiar with the rituals that accompany its recurrence. The shocked expressions of the TV newsmen. The distraught faces of those who have touched it. The clergymen offering prayer. Utter strangers in faraway cities electronically transfixed near tears in the streets. Exhausted commentators struggling for explanations because there are none and yet there is time to be filled and it is their duty to fill it.

The Aftermath

The President issues his statement. Congressmen expound. Someone assesses the political significance. Legislation is proposed. Gradually, grouped together around the social center of the TV screen with its humdrum evocation of the shared boredom of idle evenings and endless Sunday afternoons, we struggle to suppress the horror.

National explanation is the best defense, of course. Push back the dark with light and terror hasn't a chance. And so we listen, eager to believe, to the explanations. Someone suggests it is merely an isolated case of madness, but that is small comfort. A Congressman insists that a crime bill with teeth in it will put things right quickly enough. It would be comforting to believe that, but instinct argues that the case is not quite so simple.

These incidents of public violence, says a sociologically minded commentator, are, after all, only to be expected in periods when public policy and opposition to it both place unusual reliance on violence as a political instrument. Throughout history it can be well documented that...

Well, perhaps. Still, one has the uneasy suspicion that there is some new quality in American life which is not explained by any of the assurances oozing from the box. The fact is that the nightmare has acquired a permanence in this decade, and we manage to live with it by keeping it suppressed, like the mad brother of Gothic novels who is kept sealed in the attic.

For us the attic has become the deep interior of the newspapers. When the nightmare escapes and someone like President Kennedy or his brother or

Martin Luther King is touched by it, it must temporarily be faced on page one, but the fact is that even after it is rationalized back into the attic it remains a constant presence in American life.

Here in Washington today, for example, they buried Tommy Williams. He was 18 and would have graduated next week from high school. Saturday night he had gone to Georgetown with some friends. One of his friends seems to have started a quarrel with another group. A casual passerby, a stranger to both groups, decided to restore order. He produced a pistol and shot Tommy four times.

Nightmare Incidents

For Tommy Williams' classmates the nightmare was in the open again, but for most of Washington the event was a short item to be mused over in the evening paper while waiting for the baseball game to begin, and the nightmare was kept securely in the attic. Such incidents are buried daily in every large newspaper in the country. What has happened is that murder has become the substitute of the 1960's for the old-fashioned punch in the nose. And, even more alarming, it may be becoming a form of self-expression.

It does not really help understanding to say that we are see-

ing a modern evolution of the frontier tradition of gun law. The old gunmen wore their pistols in plain view on their hips or cradled their rifles out where everybody could see them. Today's gunmen are men who shoot their victims in the back, and their victims are usually the unarmed and the unwary.

And knowing this, all of us who are unarmed and unwary live with the condition as best we can by keeping the nightmare locked in the attic until it strikes someone of such eminence that we are forced to admit aloud that we have reached a pass where the bullet is now widely regarded as an instrument of political discourse, the perfect squelch in the petty quarrel, a device for gratifying the ego or a substitute for movies on Saturday night.

Gun Technology

Some disarmament would help, of course, but the National Rifle Association blocks that in Congress. Guns do not kill people, they say; people do. Marshall McLuhan has the answer to this. Human behavior, he says, is altered by the technological innovations that extend man's power. In a gun technology, the opportunity and the power to kill are extended to everyone with the ambition to send an order blank to a mail-order house.