

# The Meaning of Political Murder

Charles Frankel

"We try to make the public world orderly," writes a philosopher in response to the killing of Robert Kennedy, "and then wildness breaks out, sheer, private, dreaming malice, which cuts across everyone's hopes and cuts them down."

I KNEW Robert Kennedy, not intimately but well enough to know the fire of life that was inside him. One felt it immediately. It was tamped down and under control, but it was there as palpably as a bed of coals in a fireplace. He wanted to live with a purpose; he expected that others did too. This was why, whether people liked him or disliked him, it was impossible to feel impersonally about him. And it is one of the reasons his murder hurts so: it seems so impersonal, so purposeless.

What are its implications? At the very least we have lost a man who had qualities that we do not have enough of, either in public life or in our culture at large.

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Robert Kennedy had a kind of austere passion, a sense of focus and concentration, that is rare and valuable. There was an impatience in him, despite all his awareness of the slow, foolish realities of politics and human nature. He hated to think that there was misery in the world that didn't have to exist. He disliked inefficiency, pomposity, the fraudulent or the wasteful in talk or thought or action, because he knew the cost of doing things badly. He was disciplined and enduring himself, and he admired disciplined and enduring people. I think this was why he was drawn to athletes, to good writers, to sharp minds, to people who saw what had to be done and did it. He might have made a difference in our national style and the virtues we most admire.

Yet for me these were not his most striking traits. His most remarkable, I thought, were his way of putting his

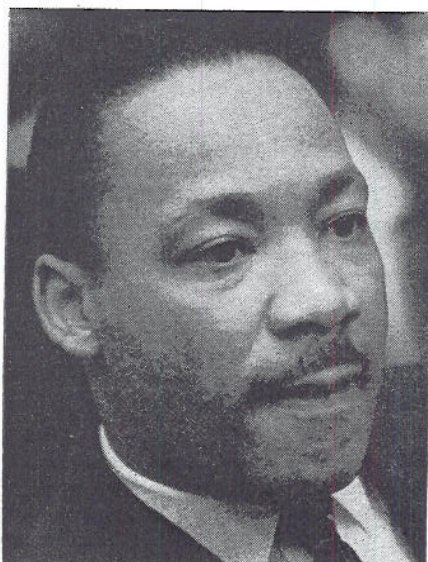
mind forth toward you when you had something important to say, and his ability to imagine other people's worlds. He was one of a relatively small number of people whom I have met in public life who really listen, and he wanted to hear, and went out of his way to hear, what he hadn't heard before. I think it was this, and not his looks or his youth or his name, that got across to the people in the ghettos and explains their feeling about him. And the deepest political implications of his death, it seems to me, lie not in its effect upon the campaign, but in what it will mean to have this man with his special capacity to listen and to respond removed from the scene.

It has been the special quality of deafness in most of our national leaders—the stilted expression of good intentions with which they have responded to shrieks of pain—which explains the awful sense of frustration that has been eating



John Fitzgerald Kennedy  
November 22, 1963

SR/June 22, 1968



Martin Luther King, Jr.  
April 4, 1968



Robert Francis Kennedy  
June 6, 1968

away at our national vitals. There has been an institutionalized, self-reinforcing deafness in the workings of our political system for the people who have been left out of our society, Robert Kennedy's death will mean that, after having found someone who apparently could hear, they must return to shouting into deaf ears. Robert Kennedy's campaign, simply his presence on the scene, gave hope that somehow men in this society might find a way to talk to one another again. That hope has received an awful blow.

Those decisions and actions this summer by our political parties which suggest a willingness to turn away from the old political voices and the old, customary political routines can make the outlook a little less somber. But it is going to take qualities in our political leaders and in their constituencies which have not been excessively conspicuous up to this time. Not many political leaders have shown that they realize that this country is in the deepest trouble it has known in a century. Most of them have gone on maneuvering for advantage in an old game whose rules are collapsing.

**Y**ET the weightiest implication of this horrible event transcends partisanship. It shakes everyone, supporters or not. Its most important meaning, it seems to me, is that, although it is full of consequences, it has no saving meaning. Thinking about it is hard because there is something irreducibly unthinkable about it. It was an event that didn't have to be; it was gratuitous and, in historical terms, madly accidental. If Kennedy had died of a heart attack, grief would be mixed with resignation. But this was an event that had the idiotic irrelevance of a natural disaster, and yet was a human deed, an intended premeditated act. And the same thing happened to his brother.

It is too much, a storekeeper in my town said to me. He didn't say it wearily, as though he couldn't take any more, but anesthetically, as though it had moved him past caring. This assassination, after all that has preceded it, after all that has happened to the Kennedys, can make us feel not personal helplessness and defeat but the collective helplessness of all of us. In the first moments and days after the news came, it must have made countless people feel that there is nothing to count on, nothing secure enough to make anything difficult worth doing.

If this civilization has had any things to be proud of, any things to lean on and hope that it could live by, they would be, I think, its free universities, its ability to organize voluntary, collective actions, and its electoral process. During the past two months I have seen the university where I have spent most of my life

tremble as though from an earthquake. The leader of an extraordinary popular movement, Martin Luther King, was killed. And along with millions of my fellow citizens, I have lost a Presidential candidate. We lay plans, we hope in some systematic way to deal with our collective problems, we try to make the public world orderly, and then wildness breaks out, sheer, private, dreaming malice, which cuts across everyone's hopes and cuts them down.

It is too much, and so the impulse is to try to make it something that one can absorb. That is the impulse, I think, behind the search for a conspiracy, and behind the lectures we are giving ourselves about our violence. Perhaps there is a conspiracy; it looks unlikely, but I don't know. Certainly it would be consoling if there were. It would give us something to strike back at. It would make the cause fit the effect, it would give us a motive appropriate to the crime.

Blaming what has happened on the violence in America helps in the same way. We do have stupefying violence in this country. It is a routine of daily life. People make money out of it; people make a science out of it; a very large number of people are entertained by it. Violence is glorified on the right and the left as the only honest and efficient political technique, and though our government issues pronouncements about the evils of violence, it has undermined its influence by using violence massively in a prolonged war in which a good part of the country does not believe.

**T**HE violence in the air today increases the likelihood that violent people, who are around in the best of times and places, will be still further inflamed. Undoubtedly, too, the murder of John Kennedy increased the likelihood of an attempt against Robert Kennedy; as he himself knew, it was bound to put thoughts into suggestible minds. There are certain kinds of public figures—John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy—who are more probable targets than others for murderous feelings. They have a kind of inner invulnerability about them—something, whether it is their bearing or supreme good fortune or special lucidity, that gives the sense that they cannot really be pierced or hurt. Envy reaches out to pull them down. So there are causes, a pattern of explanation, that can be offered for Robert Kennedy's murder, and the violence in America is part of the

story. But it is only a part, and we cannot even say that it was a necessary part. The murder itself might have happened anyway. For in the end, Robert Kennedy was killed, it appears, not by an American but by a Jordanian, and not for what he stood for in this country but for what he stood for, in one man's odd, unaccountable mind, in the Middle East. The murder could have happened in a tranquil America.

**L**ANGUAGE that says too much, indignation that finds no target and spills all over the landscape raise people's tempers and add to the climate of anxiety and violence. Grieved and angered, Arthur Miller has said that we are a violent people and that the violence reflects a great deal more: "It is murderous," he said, "to tell a man he cannot live where he wishes to live." No, it is indecent, unjust, and irrational. But murder is what happened to Robert Kennedy and that is different and deserves a different feeling and invites a different analysis. When words lose their meaning, actions lose their true proportions. If everybody is so wicked, a little murder is only a little bit worse. And if everybody is implicated in a web of collective guilt, the distinction fades between one man's honest effort and another man's malingerer.

A simple truth dominates the future, I believe, so far as political murder is concerned: the fewer murders there are, the fewer murders there will be. We can do something to reverse the present process by bringing people's tempers down in this country, by reducing the self-righteousness and intransigence of political controversy, and simply by lowering the level of Overspeak. A great deal could also be done by ending the war in Vietnam. It would be a first useful step in the longer campaign against the tendencies in America that justify or encourage violence. And just possibly the collective helplessness we now feel in the face of what has happened may sharpen our recognition that when madness is abroad in the world temperate men ought to moderate their quarrels.

And yet, in the end, we are just going to have to live with what has happened. No matter how we turn this event around to look at it and extract a moral from it, there remains in it an element of irreducible randomness, of simple, unacceptable terrible bad luck. Our spirits will revive, people will go to work again, we shall start living once more for our hopes. That is the nature of the animal. But the event is there, and no explanation can change the fact that we are faced by the inane, brutish thing that did not have to happen, and did, and is irreversible. We are going to have to live with this frustration for which there is no full relief, and with this grief for which there is no complete solace.

