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How Often Must We Take It?

By TOM WICKER

Never mind what George Wallace stands for. The attempt to assassinate him was a foul and terrible act, incomprehensible in its motivation unless—as may be—the attempted assassin was deranged.

Never mind the political consequences of this senseless deed. The only thing men of reason and decency can hope for is that Mr. Wallace recovers, as speedily as possible.

They must also ask how often this wracked and contorted nation can go through such traumatic moments. How often can it? If Alabama's Governor should die, there would be no difference—in terms of our common humanity—from the murders of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. The bell tolls for us all, and most particularly so when man has turned to wanton violence against his fellow man.

Are we cursed, then, or sick, or lacking some essential quality of character, that we should so often have been witness to these episodes in which it seems that—as James Reston wrote on Nov. 22, 1963—"somehow the worst in the nation had prevailed over the best"? Or does some political circumstance exist that makes it probable that these murderous responses will be frequently forthcoming?

The answer must be "no" to both questions—to the first, because what-

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ever degree of rationality we can still claim argues against the idea of some mystical national flaw; and to the second, if for no other reason, because of the wide diversity among the four

assassin's victims.

But can either question be left at that simple answer? For one thing, it can hardly be denied that the past decade in America has been one of remarkable violence—in response to the Southern civil rights movement, for example, then later in the black ghettos of the major cities; against white students at Kent State and against black students at Jackson State; above all, in Vietnam. Even some radical antiwar activities have turned to or advocated violence.

And what about the popularity of violent Western movies, in which the "hero" never hesitates to dispatch the "villain," a pattern repeated endlessly on virtually every television action and adventure show? What about the organized violence of professional football, in which "hitting people" is the credo of the successful? What is to be said of those endless lines outside theaters showing "The Godfather," and the applause which usually greets the murderous successes of the Corleone Family?

At the very least, this easy climate of unlimited violence can hardly fail to make an impression on minds already inclined to precipitous or ill-considered action, or warped and strained by personal circumstances—as seems to have been the case with both Sirhan B. Sirhan and Lee H. Oswald.

This may have been less so with James Earl Ray, but all three of these accused or convicted assassins, as well as Governor Wallace's assailant—and those who fired at Harry Truman and Franklin Roosevelt, as well as those who murdered Presidents McKinley, Garfield and Lincoln—did so with firearms that were easily available to them. That is another point that cannot be dodged.

Nowhere in the world are guns so readily at the assassin's hand as in America. Nowhere else is the general population so heavily armed. The blatant availability of guns in America simply cannot be set aside or discounted as a major source of violent crime. Let the gun-makers and their lobbyists, the gun-lovers and their organizations, the gun-bearers and their apologists, say as often as they will

that men, not guns, shoot people. The sheer mindlessness of that response—no one supposes that men or women don't fire these weapons—makes it scarcely worth rebuttal.

The sad likelihood is that the American climate of violence, which so often is official violence—Attica, Orangeburg and Augusta come to mind—contributes as much as "the frontier heritage" or "the sporting tradition" to the fierce American resistance to any form of gun-control laws. As long as that climate flourishes, such laws are unlikely—and such madness or depravity as that which felled George Wallace will recur.

No amount of additional Secret Service protection can altogether protect such public figures, as they move among what is essentially an armed population. And that is likely to remain the case until American leaders at every level of government in all parties and factions, whether they command armies or police forces, set the example of restraining rather than relying on violence.