

Safe and Sane Campaigns

The appalling attack on Gov. George C. Wallace is already evoking a flood of sociological comment, some of it probably valid, but most of it too abstract to serve the overriding need of the moment. That need is to make it physically safe for men to campaign for high office and to govern when they attain it—in short, to carry on the processes of democratic government. The situation calls less for theorizing than for a hard look at some pertinent aspects of recent assaults on public figures—and some decisive steps to prevent their repetition.

Of the four men convicted or accused in the shooting of President Kennedy, Senator Kennedy, Dr. King and Governor Wallace, not one was a political assassin in the traditional sense of a disciplined and deliberate killer committing an act of terror on behalf of a coherent political group. Instead, all were "loners," apparently mentally or emotionally deranged in some degree. Since hundreds of thousands of people in the country fit this description, any of whom can buy a gun, and since the candidates constantly make targets of themselves, it is remarkable that attempts on the lives of the prominent are not even more frequent.

Americans are an armed people. One authority estimated a year ago that some 24 million handguns were privately owned and a new one was being sold every thirteen seconds. The Federal gun control law, in effect since 1968, is full of holes and poorly enforced at that. Representative Bingham of New York recently found in a spot check that of ninety persons who bought handgun ammunition in this city, 23 had F.B.I. criminal records, supposedly a legal bar to such purchases. Even the little that is publicly known about Governor Wallace's assailant includes an arrest on charges of carrying a concealed weapon.

Given, then, the large numbers of unstable people in the country with easy access to lethal weapons, the only immediate relief must be a drastic reform in campaign techniques. Few Americans can want to see the nation's political battles fought out exclusively on television. The living-room screen, with the premium it puts on surface impressions and photogenic qualities, is not a medium on which the better man necessarily prevails. But surely the advantage of a candidate's physical presence need not be carried to the length of plunging into crowds to "press the flesh" and exchange personal banter. These customs may get the candidates votes, but the risk is prohibitive and the votes are not obtained on good grounds in any case.

Indeed, the time has come when casual speeches—whether in supermarkets, at airports or from the back seats of autos—should be dispensed with altogether. Let candidates make scheduled talks in closed halls, where security can be maintained, even if necessary to the point of having the audience pass metal detectors on their way in. These and similar commonsense restrictions are irksome to contemplate, but—combined with television and all the other instruments of communication—they can get a candidate's message across without the danger of subjecting the nation to traumas that can shake its faith in democracy itself.