

Experts Link Shooting to a Strain of Violence in U.S.

By MARTIN ARNOLD

A strain of violence in the American psychological make-up, going back even earlier than frontier days, was suggested yesterday by some experts as the cause of increased crime, rioting in the streets and acts of individual violence such as the shooting of Senator Robert F. Kennedy.

Dr. David Abrahamsen, a psychiatrist and a governor of the Lemberg Center for the Study of Violence at Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass., said here that Americans condone violence.

"We love it," he said. "We love to fight. The frontier days made the gun manly."

"We feel we can have anything we want. We have a unique society — so affluent. No other society has such buried frustrations," Dr. Abrahamsen said. "In France, they can riot for three weeks and only two people are killed. Can you imagine how many would have been killed here?"

New Era of Violence

"President Kennedy's assassination just started a new era of violence, but we've always had violence in our blood," he said. This comes in part, he said from the fact that Americans are seduced by "our rich physical environment" into thinking "that we can have what we want."

"The frustration and the violence comes when we find we cannot," he added.

At Brandeis, Dr. John P. Spiegel, director of the Lemberg Center and a professor of social psychiatry, took a somewhat different view.

He said that he believed the intensity of collective violence

— riots, for example — was lower in the United States than in other countries, but that in cases of individual violence "the chances are that we are high."

Referring to violence against a political or public figure, he said that the assassination of President Lincoln set the "scenario."

"Once the scenario is created it is easy to follow for the next person," he said.

'Addiction to Guns'

"The population as a whole is conditioned to expect violence," Dr. Spiegel said. "Behind this is America's gun fetish and the notion that a gun can be used to solve conflict. There is an emotional addiction, as strong as any other addiction, such as drugs, to guns."

He said, for example, that children often have toy guns among their first playthings. "They see violence produced through the [news] media and movies."

The war in Vietnam also contributes to acts of violence, he said. "We know from historical studies that acts of violence increase in time of war. When the war ends, we can pay more attention to the underlying social problems. With the war on, violence is accepted and causes an additional social stress."

Dr. Abrahamsen and Dr. Spiegel agreed that in our society not only the minority groups, such as the Negroes, but other, older immigrant groups had not been able to become integrated.

"We're not a melting pot," Dr. Abrahamsen said. "We're a damned pressure cooker. Our society is not built on the restraints of family or class;

it's built on success. If you don't have it you're frustrated. Frustration. The wet nurse of violence."

Public Figures Symbols

Dr. Abrahamsen believes that "public figures are symbols of what America stands for," and because they are "authority figures, as such, they have to be killed by those who feel frustrated by authority."

Dr. Thaddeus Kostrubala of Chicago, a member of the American Psychiatric Association's Task Force on Aggression and Violence, also sees violence as part of our national origin, commonplace not only on the frontier of the Old West, but also among the immigrants from Europe. "Every TV western has its murder," he said.

Dr. Kenneth Kenniston, psychologist at Yale Medical Center, posed the question, "Can an individual act of violence be attributed to society?"

"I've spent my whole life thinking about this," he said, "but I still don't know the answer. My view is that we do live in an era of highly publicized violence. The basic impulse to violence does not originate in the media, but given an individual with that impulse, the widespread publicity provides a channel through which psychotic impulses are expressed."

'Part of Manly Dignity'

He, too, attributed part of the violence in our society to the frontier days, and said that "it has a lot to do with our right to bear arms, which is considered part of our manly dignity."

Mainly, however, Dr. Kenniston believes that television has given "immediacy" to violence

and, by bringing it into the living room, has made it an integral part of life. "We become numbed, but some people are secretly interested and pleased" with reports of violence, he said.

Regarding the complex question of tolerance to deviant behavior in general, Dr. Kenniston said that he saw no evidence that "we are more tolerant of psychotic deviant behavior" now than we were a decade or two ago. I think they tend to get picked up earlier now," he said.

However, at Bellevue Hospital a psychiatrist, who did not wish to be identified, said that society today "has some greater tolerance to deviant behavior."

"The recent behavior of the students at Columbia is an example," he said. "The tolerance by the Columbia administration would not have been the same 10 or 15 or 30 years ago."

No Increase in Acts

He said that his experience at Bellevue gave no indication that there was an increase in acts of violence over 10 years ago. Nor did the Bellevue experience show any change in the types of violence, he said.

He said that such social phenomena as hippie communes — with their strange mores and often stranger mode of dress — did tend to provide camouflage for deviant behavior that would be picked up easily in more conventional communities.

"But the same has always been true," he said. "There were always segments of the community that were set aside to allow greater tolerance than conventional society would allow," he said.