

What Depths to Our Natural Violence?

By LOIS WILLE

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CHICAGO — Hans W. Mattick, a noted University of Chicago criminologist, was watching television, sickened by the brutal news, when he saw something "so fantastically gruesome I had to turn away."

IT was a commercial for a new movie, interrupting the reports of the shooting of Sen. Kennedy.

"The movie is called, 'A Minute to Pray, a Second to Die,'" said Mattick. "And I swear to God, in 45 seconds of the preview film I saw at least 30 people killed.

HORRIFIED

"I was horrified. What kind of country do we live in? 'It's hard to find words to describe it anymore...'"

To Mattick — and to other leading social scientists — the bloody television scenes are inexorably linked...

Together, they prove the depths of our national violence. We commit violence. We tolerate a mounting tide of violence, at home and in our foreign affairs. And, in the view of some authorities, we are a nation enamored with violence.

Black power militant H. Rap Brown said it a year ago:

"Violence is as American as cherry pie."

Last year in the United States, some 5600 persons died of gunshot wounds. In Britain there were fewer than 30, in Belgium fewer than 12, and in France fewer than 20.

The roots flourished in the blood of our Indian wars, in the vigilante justice of the frontier, in the brutalization of slavery, in the violent beginnings of our labor movement, in racial slaughters. in



TWO VICTIMS OF ASSASSINS' BULLETS
Violence stilled Sen. Kennedy, Martin Luther King

the assassination of presidents.

Of the last 21 presidents, four have been murdered. Attempts were made on the lives of two others.

"This makes it probably the highest risk job in the world," said Dr. John Spiegel, psychiatrist and director of the center for the study of violence at Brandeis University.

"And if one adds the other figures — Huey Long, Martin Luther King and now Robert Kennedy — it becomes extremely dangerous to be

unique and brilliant in public life in the United States."

These murders and attempted murders cannot be explained away by blaming them on lone madmen, according to Dr. Spiegel. True, they almost always were committed by psychopaths — but by psychopaths carefully indoctrinated in our violent tradition.

"The pattern-setting is important," he said.

BLOODY HISTORY

"Bloody history gave birth to bloody movie and television entertainment.

"This country has a romance with violence," says Mattick, associate director of the Center for Studies in Criminal Justice at the University of Chicago.

"There are so many signs. If we held human life sacred, we wouldn't have this bow-tlerized, cleaned-up violence of movies and television — where violence is something masculine you do to defend your honor.

"We wouldn't have 10,000 homicides a year, the highest rate among industrial countries. Or 10,000 suicides.

"We wouldn't have gun catalogs, probably our most obscene publications.

"Traditionally, we have been worried about the pornography of sexuality. At least sex is pointed toward life. But we have ignored the pornography of violence — which is pointed toward death."

CENSORSHIP

The contrast between French and American movie censorship policies is most revealing and illustrates Mattick's point.

In Paris, young people are forbidden to see America's pory films but are permitted to view nudity. Here, we are appalled by naked bodies but

completely tolerant of mayhem.

How did we get this way?

Historians, sociologists and psychiatrists believe a painful paradox has emerged. The very quality that made America great — the free, open society — has been perverted by some into a society where one man assumes the right to kill another man.

"Our social mobility and upward movement is the greatest of any country in the world," says June Sochen, specialist in intellectual history at Northeastern Illinois State College.

"The result is we expect quick action. We want a quick, simple solution.

HAVE RIGHT

"Many people think they have the right to bring about that solution. If you don't like the United Nations, you spit at Adlai Stevenson. If you don't like Negroes, you throw eggs at little black children bused to your school.

"If you don't like President Kennedy or Martin Luther King or Medgar Evers or Robert Kennedy, you shoot him and solve the problem.

"It's a terribly simplistic view, thinking you can stop

an idea by cutting someone down."

Assassination of a public figure is most likely to happen in times of extraordinary change, such as Lincoln's day — and in our day.

"In such times there is always the possibility of paranoid response," says Michael Harrington, sociologist and author of "The Other America."

"Unable to understand the kaleidoscopic facts, a man sees in them the pattern of a conspiracy that justifies killing a deceitful leader."

LIKE VIOLENCE

The point to remember about our affinity for violence, according to social scientists, is that it has been nurtured and supported by our history and even by our laws.

This is hard for Americans to accept. We have been reared on grade school and high school textbooks that gave "a distorted view of history for misguided patriotic reasons," says John Hope Franklin, chairman of the history department at the University of Chicago. "We were told we were infallible as a nation. Of course this isn't true."

The War of 1812 and the

Mexican War both were expansionist, not defensive. Yet they are soft - pedaled in textbooks. So are the bloodbaths during slavery and the early urban racial wars.

David Riesman, professor of social science at Harvard University and co-author of "The Lonely Crowd," condemns "our national tendency to react in wartime with unmeasured violence."

As an example, he cites the mass bombing of German and Japanese cities in World War II and the demand for unconditional surrender.

"And remember our beginning," says Hans Mattick. "We were founded by rub-

bing out the Indians, the native population.

"We defined a whole human group as being fair hunting game."

Out of this early frontier violence grew the most dangerous tradition of all, according to Dr. Spiegel: the fetish to the gun.

"It is a process of indoctrination in childhood," he says. "Americans are exposed at a very early age to the stimuli of violence through the mass media, movies, television, toys.

"In particular, they are exposed to the fetish of the gun.

"Little children go bang-bang with their fingers even before they're old enough to hold toy guns. Bang-bang, you're dead. This is the chant of childhood in America."

GUN FETISH

He attributes the gun fetish to our early frontier, when men asserted their identity rather than inheriting it — and the chief means of assertion was the gun, "the great equalizer."

Behavioral scientists get furious when they talk about the gun fetish and our lax laws that support it.

Dr. Thomas F. Pettigrew, associate professor of social psychology at Harvard, tells this story:

"Three days after the assassination of Dr. King, the National Rifle Association opened its annual meeting.

"Worried that the murder had 'dramatically changed the emotional atmosphere' concerning gun controls, the executive vice president unashamedly made his position clear. He said, 'We oppose restrictions on the right of every American to purchase and own firearms.'

VIOLENT SOCIETY

"This is more than a Washington lobbyist talking. It is the violent society."

Dr. Pettigrew agrees with Hans Mattick, who belittles all recent gun control laws.

"Every one passed so far is a farce," says Mattick.

"We must get arms out of the hands of people. We need real domestic disarmament.

"We have to treat guns the way we treat heroin — try to cut them off at the source.

"We must control the manufacture and distribution of weapons and ammunition if we are serious about attacking the problem of violence."

When they talk about causes of violence, social scientists don't stop with the sins of our past.

VIETNAM HELPS

The war in Vietnam, they say, must be considered a major reason behind domestic violence today.

"Our government has set an example of violence in its warmaking," Mattick says.

"The level of individual acts of violence always goes up when we're at war," says Dr. Spiegel. He gives two reasons, based on research at his center for the study of violence:

- "War involves everyone in violence. We are exposed to it constantly. The level of indoctrination to violence — normally high in this country — climbs even higher."

- "When we are at war, our political processes are

less able to take care of domestic tensions. Money and energies are diverted."

Below our orderly governmental surface, he says, we are a nation of many different groups full of tension, conflict and jealousy. Certain ethnic groups and classes are pushed aside, given no voice in our imperfect democracy.

TENSIONS BURST

"Even before Vietnam, these tensions were only partly resolved by our political processes. Now we are less likely to resolve them. But they have to burst out somewhere — either by acts of individual violence or by mob action."

One of the goals of Dr. Spiegel's center at Brandeis is to find some solutions to our ancient national problem of violence.

But the center is only two years old — and it is the only one of its kind in the country. "So we are just beginning to learn," he says.

He is convinced, though, that it is essential we develop "democratic political forms to take care of the unresolved tensions" of our disenfranchised minorities.

Mattick believes we need his "domestic disarmament" law, coupled with a government that sets a national example by refusing to resort to violence to solve its problems.