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Science And Crime

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Sept. 5—The tragedy at the Olympic Games is just the latest reminder that there is now a kind of madness in the world, a lunatic strain of anarchy that hinders the peace and order of mankind.

The paradox of contemporary history is fairly plain: at one and the same time, there are hopeful signs that the majority of the human race is just beginning to see that the progress of man requires the cooperation of men and women of all nations, but still the majority exists with the tyranny of the minority.

The present history of American Presidential politics has been influenced, if not determined, by deranged minds. One man takes the life of John Kennedy, another the life of his brother, Robert, a third silences the voice of Martin Luther King, a fourth changes the course of the 1972 American election by putting a bullet in the spine of George Wallace, and every commercial airplane is at the mercy, if that is the word, of any tormented skyjacker across the aisle.

The problem is not that mankind is incorrigibly villainous, or that it is indifferent to this slaughtering and murdering, but that the majority has not been able to devise ways of controlling the maniacal acts of deranged agitators and dunderheads.

The philosophers, politicians and statesmen have all tried to deal with what is obviously an iniquitous and ruinous problem, without success.

Even the Soviet Union, which puts more stress on order than any other society in the world, has just refused to go along with an international convention that would require all signatory nations to suspend their service with any nation that did not punish or extradite hijackers or saboteurs.

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So maybe we have to turn to the scientists for relief, or at least for some help, in minimizing the power of the mad minority. Shortly after the murder of President Kennedy, a few scientists did come forward and suggest to the Government in Washington that the problem of protecting Presidents, spotting guns and bombs at airports or in political rallies or any other politically sensitive area—such as the Olympic Games—could be helped by seeding ammunition and explosive detonation caps and guns with radioactive tracers such as cobalt 60, which could easily be picked up by portable detectors in the crowd or even trigger an alarm system in banks, airport baggage areas or post offices.

This idea was proposed during the Warren Commission inquiry into the Kennedy assassination. Later, the Rand Corporation urged experimentation with this notion on May 5, 1966. It has repeatedly been brought up during the Congressional hearings on gun-control since then, but very little has been done to bring the ammunition seeding proposal into operation.

There are obvious difficulties. There are now over ninety million firearms in this country—over one and a half per family. The number of handguns was increasing, until the recent legislation against "Saturday night specials," at the rate of over 2.5 million a year.

Vast quantities of nonseeded ammunition and explosive detonating caps are on hand in this country, and without an international agreement to seed ammunition with radioactive tracers, foreign ammunition could obviously be purchased. Also, handling

radioactive ammunition could be an expensive business, dangerous to the health of ammunition workers unless special precautions were taken.

Nevertheless, any preventive innovation, no matter how imperfect, is worth trying to deal with the political anarchy that killed the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, and the Israelis at the Olympic Games. The seeding of ammunition with radioactive isotopes would probably not have picked up Jack Kennedy's assassin with his long-range gun, but it would have spotted Robert Kennedy's assassin in that Los Angeles hotel, and the man who shot Governor Wallace.

There is very little evidence that any of these potential assassins is especially intelligent. They buy their guns and ammunition where they can get them, which is usually at the local sporting goods or hardware store, and even the knowledge that radioactive ammunition could be quickly detected by a Geiger counter or some other detection device could be an important restraint.

In any event, it is fairly clear that the need for control of violence against the normal political, transportation and business activities of the nation is urgent, and should be pursued with all the knowledge available, and this is not being done.

After all, the Israelis in the Olympic compound, like Robert Kennedy and George Wallace, were operating in a limited area where detectors could easily and quickly spot radioactive guns and ammunition. Even if the United States were to put the radioactive system into operation, and even with the cooperation of other nations, it would still not be fool-proof and one of its greatest dangers would be over-reliance on it.

But it is one limited way in which the present anarchy might be curbed, and the surprising thing is that it has not been tried at home or proposed to the other nations that are the major sources of guns and ammunition.