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JFK's Murder Discloses:

Strong Current Of Violence, Hatred

By IRVING HOWE

It has been hard, these last two weeks, to feel much pride in being an American. Two assassinations, each ghastly in its own right and each uncovering still another side of our social pathology; callousness, maybe planned negligence, on the part of the Dallas police; fourth-grade children in the South cheering the news that a "nigger-loving" President had been murdered; subversion of the processes of law-enforcement to the demands of television; recurrent efforts to gain political advantage, which neglect to consider that whoever may have killed the President, whether a Castroite fanatic or another kind, there remains the common breeding-ground of a hate-driven society, the common responsibility of governors and lunatics; and then smogs of piety about "national reconciliation" and "an era of good feeling" in American politics — it is just too much.

Only Mrs. Kennedy, in the splendor of her bearing, gave one any reason to be pleased with the human species; and it remains a question whether the style of a person can redeem the sickness of a culture.

Was Lee Oswald really the assassin? Despite the apparent weight of evidence, we cannot yet be absolutely certain. There is urgent reason to press for a complete inquiry; we should know whether the irregularities of his treatment by the police and the negligence that exposed him to murder were simply routine Texas conduct or a cover-up for something more sinister. An American Van der Lubbe? Probably not. It seems right now that Oswald was guilty, but we cannot be sure, and if possible, we should be.

In the long run, however, it hardly matters: for if not this Oswald, then another. What seems to me important is to sketch out his type — I do not pretend to describe him as an actual person, I wish rather to create a usable fiction, a "myth," as it emerges from the little we know about him and the somewhat more we know about his background and milieu.

A man who embodies the disorder of the city, an utterly displaced creature, totally and (what is more important) proudly alienated, without roots in nation, region, class. He cannot stand it, but what it is he cannot stand he does not know.

A semi-intellectual, he picks up phrases and bits of ideology the way a derelict picks up cigarette butts on the street. In one guise he is a man of "the left" and in another of "the right." European history of the past forty years knows plenty of such political drifters and quick-

change desperadoes. An absolutist of drifting, he is intelligent enough to be in rebellion, but sour, compulsive, repressed, seething with resentment in that intelligence. Liberal society cannot reach or understand him, and he, in turn, scorns it from the depths of chaos — or, as he comes to believe, from the heights of history. Dostoevsky was a friend of his.

He is not a Communist, for that requires patience and discipline, nor is he a Marxist, for that requires theoretic reflections. He exhibits, at some remove, the consequences of the disintegration of the Communist movement, which can no longer attract or control such desperate types, for it no longer offers them the balm of quick violence, the fantasy of sacrificial heroism, the unspeakable relief of individual action. It is of action that he dreams, a cleansing nihilist apocalypse; and he finds his true moral home not with Khrushchev or Mao, who have begun to seem bureaucratic and settled, but with a hoked-up vision of Castroism he has gotten from beguiled journalists. For him ideology is an incitement toward satisfying a need for bitter blood: he would be most at ease shooting up the streets of Caracas. It is toward the poorer, the backward, the Latin American countries that he now turns, countries, as it seems to him, where rebels have style, magnetism, blood and manliness. And who is the "main enemy" of this smoldering upsurge? Who stands most in the way of the brilliant release, at once military and anarchic, which it promises him?

But he is also a Southerner, a poor Southern boy burning with memories of class humiliation. The South, because of its racist mania, is a violent society, and as long as it is committed to racism, it must remain a violent society. That violence is immediately visible not merely along its fringes, where the deviants and extremists gather, but also at its very center, in the power of the police and the brutality of the sheriff, as these are acquiesced in by the good citizens. Lashed

together by the delusion of superiority, the whites know violence to be a potent answer to threats from the dark. And those very few who turn against this society must find it hard — so wracking is their apostasy — to avoid the extremist fevers which course through it. In the South men know how to shoot.

Now place against this emblem of our pathology still another, the one suggested by the sudden appearance of Jack Ruby. A petty grifter, he has hustled his way through life with not great success, and knows something about the harsh skills of the underworld, which he half admires, and something about the harsh authority of the cops, which he wholly admires. He moves between these two worlds of force, sometimes landing in a racketeer union, sometimes handling bets near a race-track, but always having to acknowledge the power of both worlds.

If not a man of ideology he is certainly a man of principles, for he goes to shul every Friday night, he is generous to his sister, he loves the Presidents, every last one of them, and now finding himself in the manly precincts of Texas, he sports the clothing of a Southern tough. He is quick to rise in defense of the accredited pieties, even if his whole experience constitutes a denial of them. (Al Capone once issued a statement from jail denouncing Communism as an enemy of the American way of life.) Scrounging a fast buck, squirming in the interstices of society, he nevertheless quivers with patriotic righteousness. In the South men know how to shoot.

And then, the nightmare city. Its police chief explains why he had announced publicly the time the first suspect would be moved, thereby giving the second killer his opportunity: "We could have moved him earlier, but we told you fellows [reporters and TV men] 10 a.m. and he wanted to live up to it." Immortal words, filled with the spirit of our century! The law becomes an appendage of publicity, and experience the raw materials for spectacle.

Yet the city survives. "Dallas," runs a headline in the November 26 New York World-Telegram, "Dallas Finds Solace in Wealth." And the story opens: "Talk to the people of Dallas about guilt and they tell you about their mansions, their oil wells and their riches. They pour money on their wounds."

Blessed are the rich in pocket, for they have inherited the earth.

Whether Lyndon Johnson now becomes a trifle more "liberal," whether Goldwater's chances have been damaged, whether the Republicans will nominate a northern

Johnson — such questions can be left to the newspapers. About some we have already been assured: Max Lerner writes that Mr. Johnson will make a great president, for the office elevates the man (as the accumulation of national experience no doubt proves).

Would it be sacrilegious to whisper that John F. Kennedy—for all his charm, his style, his intelligence — was not quite the “great president” almost everyone seems obliged to say he was? To enter this dissent in no way affects the grief every decent person feels at the President's death: after all, even not-so-great Presidents, like not-so-great human beings in general, have a right to live out the natural course of their lives.

Mr. Kennedy performed one deed for which he deserves high credit, and that is the signing of the atom test-ban treaty; even though the treaty has more symbolic import than final bearing, it is valuable insofar as it reflects the desire of almost everyone for an easing of the cold war.

But, as for the rest of Mr. Kennedy's record, especially in domestic affairs, he was not a firm or innovating liberal, and what is more, he did not particularly claim to be. It was only his friends and his guests who made that claim. He confined himself far too much to legislative and bureaucratic maneuvering; he did not understand the necessity or value of trying to arouse the masses of people to a strongly felt political involvement and participation. His proposals were at best intelligent, but almost entirely insufficient. And on the crucial issue of civil rights, he lagged at first, responded only after a great mass movement of Negroes exerted heavy pressure, and then failed to understand that there are some issues on which it is better, both morally and politically, to go down fighting than to back away shrewdly.

(Mr. Norman Cousins, in a cadenced editorial, justifies this failure by noting that Abraham Lincoln also failed to satisfy the impatient critics of his day. Well, it is just possible that Lincoln was wrong; and in any case, we might remember that Mr. Kennedy was facing the issue of Negro rights a hundred years later, when there was far less excuse for hesitation and when the impatient had had some time in which to accumulate.)

The immediate prospect, as all observers remark, is for a period of “cooperation” and “moderation.” Very good. That the shame and grief roused by the assassination may lead to some desirable consequences, is a bitter possibility. That the interval of “good feeling” will last more than a few months is a naive assumption.

All historical experience indicates that such moments—from which, to be sure, every possible advantage for the cause of civil rights should be squeezed — do not and cannot last long. For the issues that have wracked American society these past years run too deep — the differences of social interest and ideological outlook are too strong — to allow any event, no matter how tragic, to keep them from reappearing.

What has been shaping up in American society is a fundamental struggle as to its future direction, and the sad fact is that the most aggressive and determined political pressures have been coming from the right. Not merely or even primarily from the Birchers or Southern racists or

conservative ideologies: in themselves these people are not too important: they matter as an advanced guard, or noisy symptom, or extreme manifestation, of a deep-going fundamentalist reaction, a slow-moving and incipient counter-revolution, that has been gathering among the middle classes.

This is a rebellion against history. It is a wish to be done with those burdens that mar the enjoyment of new-found wealth and status. It is a desperately nostalgic impulse to shake off the complexities — which, in the absence of a coherent liberal leadership, have a way of emerging as the confusions—of world politics. And as anyone can testify who has spent some time in the Far West, this reaction involves an unashamed class selfishness such as we have not seen openly expressed in this country for some time, a new kind of Social Darwinism which is laced with the snobberies of greed and racism, a frigid contempt for those millions who are said, somewhere in the invisible depths, to be still suffering poverty and joblessness.

I think we should take this phenomenon with great seriousness. Today it may appear as an attachment to Goldwater, but in social range and depth it goes beyond the Goldwater movement. Signs of

it could already be found in the Eisenhower following, and it will survive the possible collapse of the Goldwater boom. For a few months this socio-political impulse may be silenced, but it speaks too authentically for the sentiments of millions of Americans to be long suppressed.

Every issue in American politics — from civil rights to joblessness, from automation to support for colleges, from medicare to city planning — now elicits a fundamental divergence in outlook. It cannot be helped: not all the speeches of President Johnson, nor all the columns of James Reston, can prevent it. The issue is not, as the rightist doctrinaires claim, between capitalism and socialism, but between a firm decision to pull away from modernity and social responsibility, and the inclination to move (more often stumble) toward an enlarged welfare state.

This, I would contend, is the central issue in American political life, and the struggle in regard to it cannot be stilled or long postponed. It seems to me a little shocking when one hears intelligent people reduced to an American equivalent of Kremlinology and engaged in gossipy speculations as to whether “Lyndon” will shift his political stress for tactical reason, and what “Arthur” said or didn't say. Instead, we had better do some hard thinking and make some genuine commitments. For, without indulging in the usual sort of scares about a resurgence of McCarthyism or the terror of the Birchites — (what matters now is a social impulse deeper, more native, more authentic than its extreme manifestations; it is a blend, so to say, of Ike and Barry) — I think we should recognize how the contending forces are disposed and how serious and prolonged the coming struggles are likely to be.

From a liberal-left perspective there is reason for disquiet. The labor movement, facing major perils, dozes away in a state of intellectual torpor: it appeals to no segments of the unorganized, it gains no loyalties among the young, it barely makes itself heard in the discussions of national policy. The liberal movement, as a movement, has become slack, uncombat-

ive. And even the one tremendously encouraging development of the last few years, the rise of the Negroes, is for the moment balked, uncertain in perspective, a little exhausted, trapped in the dilemma that its all-too-reasonable immediate demands involve the deepest issues and problems of the American economy . . .

Intellectuals ought to be able to look beyond the moment, which means to look beyond the pieties of “national reconciliation” and toward the difficulties ahead. No one is going to be adored for saying this, but that does not make it any the less true.

IRVING HOWE is the editor of DISSENT. His article was reprinted from the December 26 issue of the New York Review, an excellent new book review journal, by permission of The New York Review and Irving Howe.