

Hawkshaw, The Politician

By Russell Baker

Only babes and fools, apparently, would ask why an investigation of murder should be conducted by politicians instead of homicide detectives, for nobody who counts has thought it worthwhile to raise the question in Washington.

There, broad suggestions that Government closets rattle with the skeletons of assassinated foreign statesmen have been troubling the authorities for months, but not enough to make anyone pick up a telephone, call the cops and ask for professional help.

When the possibility of foul play was first mentioned to the President, whose task is to carry out the laws, he put the investigation in charge of the Vice President, whose task is to preside over the Senate. To appreciate the unorthodoxy of this approach, you have only to imagine yourself suddenly embarrassed by public discovery of sundry dead bodies in your closet.

You would expect official callers, of course, but scarcely the Vice President of the United States. Chances are that your visitors would be efficient gentlemen in snap-brim hats, coroners, photographers, fingerprint experts and such.

If, instead, you found yourself facing the Vice President, you would feel mightily relieved, I dare say, since Vice Presidents do not work closely with prosecuting attorneys or take people before grand juries.

When you have bodies in the closet and it is the Vice President who comes

OBSERVER

calling instead of the chief of homicide, you may justifiably breathe easier, sensing that you have a friend at headquarters.

In this instance, of course, the imputation of murder lay against the Central Intelligence Agency, and official-minded people who think of themselves as "responsible" have justified keeping police professionals out of the investigation on the usual grounds that the C.I.A. is a "sensitive" agency that is better left to the scrutiny of men peculiarly aware of the demands of national security. Which is to say, politicians.

Sensitive though they may be to the need for national security, politicians as investigators suffer from a grave professional defect. They are excessively interested in winning elections and constantly in need of issues that will advance this purpose.

It is almost inevitable that a politician sent out to investigate a murder will be less interested in clearing up the case than in turning it into a political issue. This is what seemed to happen after President Ford and Mr. Rockefeller slipped into gumshoes and deer-stalker caps.

Official interest in getting to the bottom of the mystery became curiously tepid. Mr. Rockefeller ended his investigation with the facts still undeveloped. The President studied his report and decided not to reveal its findings about murder. Instead, the whole matter was bucked up to Capitol Hill for fuller investigation by Senator Frank Church, a Democrat.

No cynicism about politics is needed to sense that the White House Hawkshaws are less interested in prosecuting murder than in prosecuting the 1976 Presidential campaign. In the Justice Department they had unlimited investigative resources, prosecutors and power to convene grand juries. In their control over the C.I.A., they had power to compel something like forthright testimony from an agency whose official mission is to deceive and lie—or spread "disinformation," to use the C.I.A. euphemism—when braced by snoopers outside the official circle.

Having all the tools to do the job, why pass the buck to a comparatively ineffectual Senate committee headed by a Democrat? The White House appears more interested in playing Old Maid than in getting to the bottom of murder.

The past weeks' squawking and innuendo from the competing parties suggest that the point of the game is to leave Senator Kennedy stuck with the losing card. This would not be an unnatural goal for a Republican Government, since the Senator is considered the most dangerous Lancelot the Democrats can send forth in the coming campaign.

What we do know from the Rockefeller investigation is that it focused on assassinations discussed, planned or executed from late 1959 through 1963, when John F. Kennedy was President. A linkage between John Kennedy and murder, presumably, would take the gloss off the Camelot myth and diminish Edward Kennedy's political charm. The myth just might be even more delicious if its wrecking is done, not by a Republican Administration, but by the liberal Senate Democrat, Mr. Church.

President Ford has stated nobler motives for abandoning the case. The events in question happened so long ago, he says, that he will not sit in judgment. He prefers to let the miscreants be judged by history.

When you've got bodies in your closet, this is a lot better than being judged by twelve jurors. If I had done murder, I should prefer politics over justice seven days a week.