

(Companion article, by Albert Gore, pasted separately.)

The Presidency: Too Soon to Love Again

By Priscilla McMillan

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Presidential politics, for many of us, has become an area of life cordoned off by shock, grief and pain. Again and again in the past decade we have been touched and wounded by the political process as we had not been wounded before. It is not indifference but the numbness of mourning that lies behind the apparent apathy observers have noticed during the election campaign.

It goes back to President John F. Kennedy whose political and family life were brought extraordinarily close to us on TV. On that terrible day in Dallas nine years ago his death, too, was brought extraordinarily close.

Many Americans simply have not recovered. Even the moguls of TV, men not noted for their sensitivity, seem to recognize this for they seldom show a long film clip of John F. Kennedy in action. They realize that it is still too painful, that the process of mourning is incomplete, that our sorrow is not yet spent.

Not only our apathy, but some of the cynicism the pundits have noticed this year goes back to the murder of J.F.K. For what did his assassination do but stop the political process dead in its tracks, short-circuit democracy by substituting the will of a single madman for that of a nation? Of what value is a system geared to expression of the popular will if the workings of that will can be wiped out in a second?

We still were struggling with our guilt and grief and with political questions raised by the assassination when, five years later, we had to face it again, first with the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King and then that of Robert F. Kennedy. And this year, just as the campaign was warming up, we were reminded of the shock and horror all over again by the nearly fatal shooting of Governor Wallace of Alabama.

Is it any wonder that some of us were tempted to plunge into campaigning this year, tempted to get hopeful about national politics once again, only to draw back out of a dimly perceived need for self-protection? It is not that we have grown morally callous, as the pundits say, or that we have been manipulated into insensibility. It is simply that we want to put some emotional distance between ourselves and the political scene, charged as it now is with feelings of anxiety and pain.

Among politicians, the first to understand was Eugene McCarthy who, even before the murders of 1968, was campaigning with cool and telling us we ought to expect less of the office of President. It was a message we wanted to hear. The fewer of our emotions we invest, after all, the less we stand to be hurt.

But the great beneficiary has been Richard M. Nixon. For some people it is a protection to have a President they do not love or even like. Gary Hart, Senator McGovern's campaign manager, has commented that support for Mr. Nixon is "a mile wide and an inch deep." Exactly. An inch deep is as deeply as many Americans want to care right now.

We are told that Mr. Nixon needs to pace himself, to conserve his emotional energy and limit his contacts with people. Accordingly, he seldom meets the public face to face and has held far fewer press conferences than any President in modern times. By staying out of sight, by tailoring this aspect of his office to his needs, President Nixon may be meeting our needs as well. His low visibility, which would have been accounted a failure of leadership in other times, may be an accidental stroke of genius for now.

The fact that we have not finished mourning, have not settled our accounts over the deaths of John and Robert Kennedy, has implications for Edward Kennedy as well. Should he run for President he, and we, will have to deal, not with our feelings about him alone, but with the overlay of unresolved emotions about his brothers. This was apparent three years ago when Kennedy drove off a bridge on Chappaquiddick Island and had trouble accounting for his actions in the hours immediately afterward. The press and public leaped on him. They pronounced him "politically dead." In what they said and the way they said it, there was something savage, something like triumph or relief.

What we were engaged in that year was the symbolic murder of Edward Kennedy. We were killing him ourselves. In that way we could spare ourselves the horror of yet another, real-life Kennedy assassination. By taking matters into our own hands, we

were trying, however, to wrest back that control over events that we lost.

It will be hard for Americans to recover. Meanwhile, we are paying the price: the loss of our hope about leadership and a failure to invest the best of our energies and emotions in national politics.

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