

A Nightmare Revisited

Dawn broke on an incredible day of shock and horror in California this morning.

While hundreds of communities were still tabulating the votes cast in yesterday's presidential primary election, the man who was the choice of millions of voters fought for his life in a Los Angeles hospital, a bullet imbedded in his brain.

There is a special horror to the attempted assassination of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy. Our nation is suddenly becoming conditioned to accept such acts as believable.

President John F. Kennedy is dead of an assassin's bullet. So is Dr. Martin Luther King. Sen. Robert F. Kennedy's life hangs in the balance. The assassin in America today is believable.

This time it did not happen in Dallas. It did not happen in Memphis. It happened in California. Many of us had hoped that this, at least, would have remained unbelievable.

It is bitterly ironic that an act which can be described only as emerging from the absolute depths of barbarism should have been so closely associated with an event exemplifying the very essence of civilized conduct and government — a free election by the people of a democracy.

For the viewer of the late television returns, it was a terrifying presentation of contrasts — almost too much for the mind to accept or absorb.

Before making his victory speech, the young Senator from New York, the nation's former attorney general, had waited until he was sure he had won the California Democratic victory he had sought.

When the moment at last came in the ballroom of Los Angeles' Ambassador Hotel, he was gracious, thankful, even light-hearted. Television viewers saw and heard him thank his supporters; plea for an end to violence in America; remark upon Don Drysdale's

sixth consecutive shutout for the Dodgers; speak generously of his chief primary opponent, Sen. Eugene McCarthy; and wise-crack about both his dog, Freckles, and his expectant wife, Ethel.

Then he left the bandstand, shaking hands with well-wishers. Television pictures shifted elsewhere — but only briefly.

Suddenly, Senator Kennedy's impressive victory was transformed into another American tragedy. A man pulled a gun. The Senator was shot twice.

Viewers found themselves sitting in helpless anguish in their living rooms as they watched plea after plea on live television for doctors. Pandemonium, hysteria, unfolded in the hotel and on American television screens.

It was as if a nightmare — the shooting of the Senator's brother less than five years ago — were being revisited. But there was no way to wake up, to make that nightmare go away.

Today the tragedy — beset Kennedy family — which gave one son to the nation in a world war and another while he served as President — awaits the fate of still a third son. Can it be of much comfort that their grief is also the nation's grief, that their prayers are also all of our prayers?

As for the nation as a whole, the events of early today can only make the emotional crisis which grips our country that much more severe.

What is the nation to do? Have we indeed degenerated into a society which must increasingly expect to live with political assassination and attempted assassination?

Are lawlessness and violence more and more to become the methods of sick, twisted and bitter men?

Would that the answers were easy. They're not. But surely our nation has the strength, the character, the resources to find answers — whether it be through tougher legislation, greater moral leadership or a combination of both. We must persevere.

For just as surely as a little bit of what was once good and prideful about our nation died with John F. Kennedy, just as surely as a little bit more died with Dr. Martin Luther King — another bit of our proud heritage lies, at this writing, in critical condition in a Los Angeles hospital.