

World Morality Crisis

Kennedy New Victim of Lawlessness Threatening Modern Public Order

By JAMES RESTON

Robert F. Kennedy is only the latest victim of a modern world that has turned loose greater forces than it can control. The struggles between the nations, between the races, between the rich and the poor, between the individual and bewildering change have produced a plague of lawlessness and violence that is now sweeping the globe. The pressures of all this are too much for weak and demented minds. The assassins of President Kennedy, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Lee Harvey Oswald and the attacker of Senator Kennedy may merely be deranged demons, tormented by frustrations and intoxicated by fear or revenge. But there is something more to it than that.

This is not merely rejection of the view that life is essentially decent, rational and peaceful, nor is it even a decline into individual moral insanity.

There is something in the air of the modern world: a defiance of authority, a contagious irresponsibility, a kind of moral delinquency, no longer restrained by religious or ethical faith. And these attitudes are now threatening not only personal serenity but also public order in many parts of the world.

Evidence of the use of force to achieve personal, group, or national ends is all around us: in the war in Vietnam, in the Arab-Israeli war of last year, in the student revolts in the United States, France and Italy, in the massacres of Indonesia, and in the political and racial assassinations of the last few years.

Rejection of traditional rules of personal and institutional conduct is now common. But this is not unprecedented, and spectacular generalizations about this are not very helpful.

"At what point shall we expect the approach of danger?" Mr. Lincoln asked in 1837, speaking of this type of problem. "I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us."

He continued: "I hope I am not over-wary; but if I am not, there is, even now, something of ill-omen amongst us. I mean the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country; the growing disposition to substitute the wild and furious passions.

"This disposition is awfully fearful in any community; and that it now exists in ours, though grating to our feelings to admit, it would be a violation of truth and an insult to our intelligence to deny."

He added later that the American people were "destitute of faith and terrified of skepticism." Thus the contemporary analysis of our present predicament is not new. The record of violence, plain as it is, still does not match the

convulsive era of 1914-1945.

Labor violence, for one thing, has visibly declined. Also, we are now in our 23d year since the last World War, which is already longer than the period of comparative peace between the two World Wars.

Nevertheless, the climate of violence in civil life in America is alarming and the death toll in Vietnam is still running at over 400 Americans a week.

The direction of verbal violence toward Robert Kennedy in this campaign has been conspicuous. His passionate defense of the Negro and the

young, and his outspoken criticism of the war evoked intense and bitter feelings against himself.

Nobody who was in California during the campaign and listened to the radio harangues against him and his policies, particularly out of Oakland, could regard this as normal political criticism.

Some of it was directed against his economic views, much of it was racist in character, and a great deal of it was personal and vindictive over his campaign expenses and his appeals for peace.

Beyond this, the fantasy violence of American literature, television and the movies provides a contemporary gallery of dark and ghastly crime, which undoubtedly adds to the atmosphere in which weak and deranged minds flourish.

Fortunately, it cannot be said of this campaign that the other candidates strayed beyond the bounds of legitimate political debate. Senator Eugene J. McCarthy was mild almost to the point of boredom in his recent television debate with Senator Kennedy. At no time did he indulge in criticism to which anybody could object.

Nevertheless, the modern American political campaign goes on, as Senator McCarthy pointed out yesterday as if this were still a lightly populated agrarian country, where old-fashioned political rallies could be carried on with safety.

Senator Kennedy himself inspired great emotion, particularly among the young, and the vast crowds that he drew in the great cities were not only a barrier to thoughtful discussion but also a menace to his person.

The need, therefore, for more restraint and security in these urban political rallies is fairly obvious. The feeling against President Johnson before he withdrew from the race was so intense that he was hopping from one military base to another on unannounced tours most of the time.

Thus, the politics of the last few months and years have been influenced and sometimes influenced decisively by a minority of militants. The attack on Senator Kennedy is likely to have almost as much of an effect on the future of American politics as the assassination of his brother did in 1963.

Even if Robert Kennedy recovers completely, he is not likely to be able to regain his full vigor early enough to continue the campaign. Ironically, it may be his brother Edward, 36 years old, who will now be a factor in the race, probably as a Vice-Presidential nominee.

Failing this, the revulsion of the nation against the crime in Los Angeles may very well add to the sentiment for a wholly new beginning with the Republicans or with Senator McCarthy, who started the political revolt against the Administration.

The outlook now is for a much more orderly and somber campaign, conducted much more on national television and much less in the streets.

The public mood for the present is against the noisy carnival atmosphere of the past. It has been startled once more into reflection about the violence and banalities of traditional politics and the purposes and priorities of public life.

This more solemn attitude is likely, moreover, to work against the continued violence of the war and thus help Senator McCarthy in his campaign for peace and the White House.