

Max Lerner

What Makes a Sirhan?

MANY YEARS AGO I had a teacher, Herman Kantorowicz, a great political thinker who was a refugee from Nazi Germany. He said, "Men possess thoughts, but ideas possess men." Nothing could illustrate this better than the killing of Robert Kennedy.

It is one thing to deal with issues on a rational plane. It is quite another thing to deal with vast, sweeping ideas, in the sense of isms and ideologies, which enter into people with demonic strength and by a curious witchcraft compel them to do their bidding. It is a question of who is master, who is mastered. A man is master of his rational thoughts; he is mastered by his isms, his ideologies.

WHATEVER a jury may one day decide about the alleged killer of Robert Kennedy, the question of how you prevent other such killers will be a complex one. In such assassinations there are always three killers in one. There is the gun — and who can doubt now the need for the strongest possible gun law? There is the man who holds the gun — and who can doubt that his early history within his family determines his mental sickness or health? There is the passion that pulls the trigger, and in the case of political assassinations that passion is a political one — an obsessive hatred, a twisted idea that possesses the man with the gun.

Of the three-killers-in-one — the gun, the sick man and the twisted idea — the gun may be the easiest to deal with. We have to make it very hard for the man to get that gun. The sick man is harder to deal with. The twisted idea may be the hardest of all.

The stuff being dug up by research on the early background of Sirhan B. Sirhan is worth pondering. The unstable, uprooted family life in Arab Jerusalem, the violent

father, the rigid religious fanaticism of the mother, the ordeal of poverty, the turbulence of the Arab-Israeli war, the pathos of life for refugees, the second uprooting and migration to America: these were enough to unbalance any child.

Those who talk of America as a sick society might reflect that in this case the conditions of mental sickness preceded the immigration to America. The roots of the sickness were elsewhere — in a war-torn, hate-scarred no-man's-land of Arab refugees.

In dealing with the third killer, the twisted idea, there is one crucial thing to note about America. It is the fact that American party politics has never been ideological politics. The politics of Europe has been, and to some extent Latin America, and obviously the politics of Communist parties and nations everywhere. But politics in America has been largely one of pragmatism and personalities, which may be one reason why America, with all its history of irregular violence, has up to now escaped sustained ideological violence.

That is changing now. There are passionate isms emerging in the ghetto and on the university campuses.

ROBERT KENNEDY believed deeply in the positions he took, but he was never a fanatic. His closest political ties were with the Negro voters, who lost in him a committed and imaginative friend and champion. It would have been less surprising, although equally shocking, if someone with a twisted hatred of Negroes had decided to shoot Sen. Kennedy. His support of Israel's cause was authentic, but it did not loom as large in his campaign. But to reason thus is to try to apply logic to a sick mind, possessed by a sick idea, which fired a gun that should never have been there.