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SF Olson
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HERB CAEN



Holiday at Half-Mast

IT HAS BEEN a week of unparalleled tragedy and irony, and today, in the crowning irony, the Nation is summoned to give thanks. Thanksgiving Day, one of our oldest observances, with the Flags at mourning for the youngest President—and the families will gather from here to Hyannis Port, where there will be an empty chair at the table, and who among us will not be thinking of that?

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BUT, AS THE BISHOP said hopefully in Grace Cathedral, out of so much evil, surely some good must come. And perhaps he is right—although the price was too terrible. We, all of us, paid bitterly for our smugness, our selfishness, our foolish pride. A shot in Texas warned us that it CAN happen here, as Sinclair Lewis predicted so many years ago, and during those four dark days of November we learned new lessons about ourselves and each other. That is a small thing to give thanks for, for we still don't know whether the lesson came too late, but it is something.

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FOR THE PAST WEEK the world has been looking at us perhaps more critically than ever before, but the picture that emerges is not totally black. We are the Nation of monstrous error, as illustrated by the events in Dallas, but we are also the country of Jacqueline Kennedy, an enduring figure of nobility. The great mass of Americans reacted with such dignity and restraint that the man in the pulpit on Nob Hill could assert with confidence: "As a people we are united as never before." If that is so—and again the cost was prohibitive—it is something to give thanks for, too.

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AND WHERE DO WE GO from here? Well, for one thing, we go back to work, but not as though nothing had happened, because everything has happened. An age vanished in a week. Values were shaken up so brutally that they can never be measured by the same yardstick. It is the age of speed, but even so the speed with which everything changed is staggering in itself. The Nation has grown older, and perhaps wiser. Over and over again the past few days I have heard people begin: "Say, have you heard that—did you know—oh well, it isn't important anyway." The old lines of communication are shot. Nobody at the moment is quite sure what is important, and the fact that we are even thinking about that—Americans are not strong for introspection—might be a hopeful sign.

A VANISHED AGE. Can you even recall what seemed of paramount concern a short week ago? The headlines were large with a coed who had disappeared, the turmoil in Vietnam, the marksmanship of Y.A. Tittle, the decline and fall of a local football team whose name has not crossed many lips recently. The election of a Mayor was still being discussed and analyzed—"an amazing upset, fantastic thing," a lot of people were saying. The rebuilding of a dilapidated temporary building would, it seemed, cost a couple of million more than anticipated, and even then it wouldn't look as gloriously temporary as before. Mr. Burton and Miss Taylor, giants last week in the public consciousness, have suddenly been reduced in size to ordinary human beings with quite ordinary problems. Let us give thanks for that, at least.

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ONE WEEK AGO, seven days in the past, 168 short hours back in the golden age of a young and confident leader, Texans were still vaguely comic characters who had too much money (have you seen the new Neiman-Marcus catalogue?), a man I went to school with phoned from Washington with a new anti-Kennedy joke (I forced a laugh, because I had heard it before) and a small stack of neatly printed cards arrived from a humorous printer in Minneapolis ("Don't Be a Bigot," they read. "Hate Everybody!"). Only a week ago hate was still something to joke about, because everybody knows that Americans don't really hate. Seriously, that is.

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IN A WEEK we have learned too much, and much of it too late. A week ago we were all fully prepared to give thanks that we are the best-fed, best-housed, best-paid people on the face of the earth, that we lived amid peace and plenty, that we were the acknowledged leaders of the free world (our God-given right) and that, in contrast to events in South America and Southeast Asia, this was not a land of terror and violence. A week ago we could have sat down to our turkey with an easy conscience, and the jokester at the table would have drawn a laugh by giving thanks that we are not turkeys. We would not have given much thought, probably, to the young man in the White House, and not too many of us would have read his Thanksgiving proclamation. That's one of the things you take for granted. Will we ever again take for granted a good man in the White House?

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AND SO WE ENTER the new age, this Thanksgiving Day, brutally shaken, but more aware than ever before of the dark forces around us—and within ourselves—that can still be controlled. If we have learned anything, we have learned that there is no such thing as security. When anarchy reigns—and anarchy begins when you stop caring for your fellow man—then not even the most valuable man in the land is safe. All the guns in the Secret Service could not keep him safe, and all the weapons of destruction at our command will not keep us safe. The only shield is compassion and understanding, firm in the face of hate.

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IF WE HAVE LEARNED that, let us this day give thanks.