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More Bremers growing among the lost children

WASHINGTON — The soft blond face, the dark glasses, the wide smile — and behind them the terrifying, murderous fantasies. The face of Arthur Bremer, the would-be assassin of Governor Wallace, has become another painful image flickering in the nation's memory. It takes its place alongside of Sirhan B. Sirhan, scowling and darkly handsome, and Lee Harvey Oswald, wincing in pain as Jack Ruby gunned him down.

Bremer had read accounts of those earlier assassins. He, too, wanted to have his face flashed on millions of television screens and his name printed on the front pages of every newspaper. He, too, would have his moment of mad glory, his revenge — not on George Wallace — but on life itself.

'My future was small'

"My future was small, my past an insult to any human being," he wrote in his diary.

Everything that has been learned about his wretched family life, his extreme loneliness, and his emotional frustration confirms his portrait of himself. Remarkably like the pathetic Oswald, he began an odyssey in search of a hero victim — first Nixon, then Wallace — whose destruction would somehow redeem his own desperate futility.

Bremer is sick. He should be in a hospital receiving treatment. If he is placed in a prison and receives no psychiatric care, he is sure to deteriorate.

Curious exercise

Yet the state of Maryland has just gone through the curious exercise of holding a public trial in which a jury not only found Bremer guilty of the Wallace shooting — fact not really in dispute — but also determined that he is "sane" and legally responsible. A judge then sentenced him to a total of 63 years in prison. To compound this cruel folly, the federal government is planning to hold a second trial and find Bremer guilty all over again.

As a practical matter, these trials may make no difference. Bremer is likely to be sent to a prison facility where he will receive some psychiatric attention. But this legal posturing discredits the nation's judicial system and says something dismal about public understanding of mental illness.

No one doubts that if Bremer — before he committed his crime — had been examined by any competent psychiatrist, he would have been diagnosed as seriously ill and prompt treatment would have been recommended.

A willing expert

At the trial, however, the prosecution as usual was able to produce medical witnesses who testified that he could be considered sane. Whatever the subject matter of expert testimony — medicine, ballistics, handwriting — a lawyer can nearly always find an expert willing to disagree with the other side's expert.

There is something surrealistic, however,

in asking laymen to arbitrate the professional disagreements of psychiatrists. Would any jury of laymen be asked to decide between differing diagnoses of a defendant's ulcers or gall bladder?

In fact, the Bremer jurors did not try to

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arbitrate. They ignored all the experts and decided on the basis of their own uneducated impressions.

Using horse sense

The jury foreman said: "They used so many big words. They couldn't agree. They were so evasive. You had to use horse sense."

"Sane" and "insane" are legal, not medical terms. They should long since have been abolished from the lawyer's lexicon. People are not sharply divided between the normal and the abnormal. Human behavior moves along a continuum. Even strong, self-confident persons can sometimes act irrationally for a brief moment while vulnerable, disorganized persons such as Bremer can for periods of time hold down a job or drive a car or write a diary.

Simple truths

These simple truths should be familiar to any intelligent layman, but obviously they are not. Bremer's diary was introduced by his own defense lawyer as proof of his insanity since it is almost a textbook example of paranoia. But so naive was the "horse sense" of the jurors that several of them cited the diary as evidence of Bremer's sanity. The incomprehension of these typical Americans points up the difficulty in getting public action to combat mental illness.

At this very moment across America, there are tens of thousands of future Arthur Bremers and Lee Oswalds in the making. Medical science has wiped out most of the childhood scourges — whooping cough, scarlet fever, measles, diphtheria, polio. The remaining great affliction is incipient mental illness. Medical science could save many disturbed children before they become hopelessly sick if there were a program to identify them early and if there were enough psychiatrists, clinics, and substitute homes.

Overcrowded, understaffed

As it is, almost every public institution for disturbed children is overcrowded and understaffed. In despair, family court judges often leave emotionally damaged children in their unhappy homes rather than send them to such crowded places. Many of these children show up again five or ten years later — in criminal court.

Nothing can be done about tomorrow's assassins unless the public cares enough to save today's lost children.

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