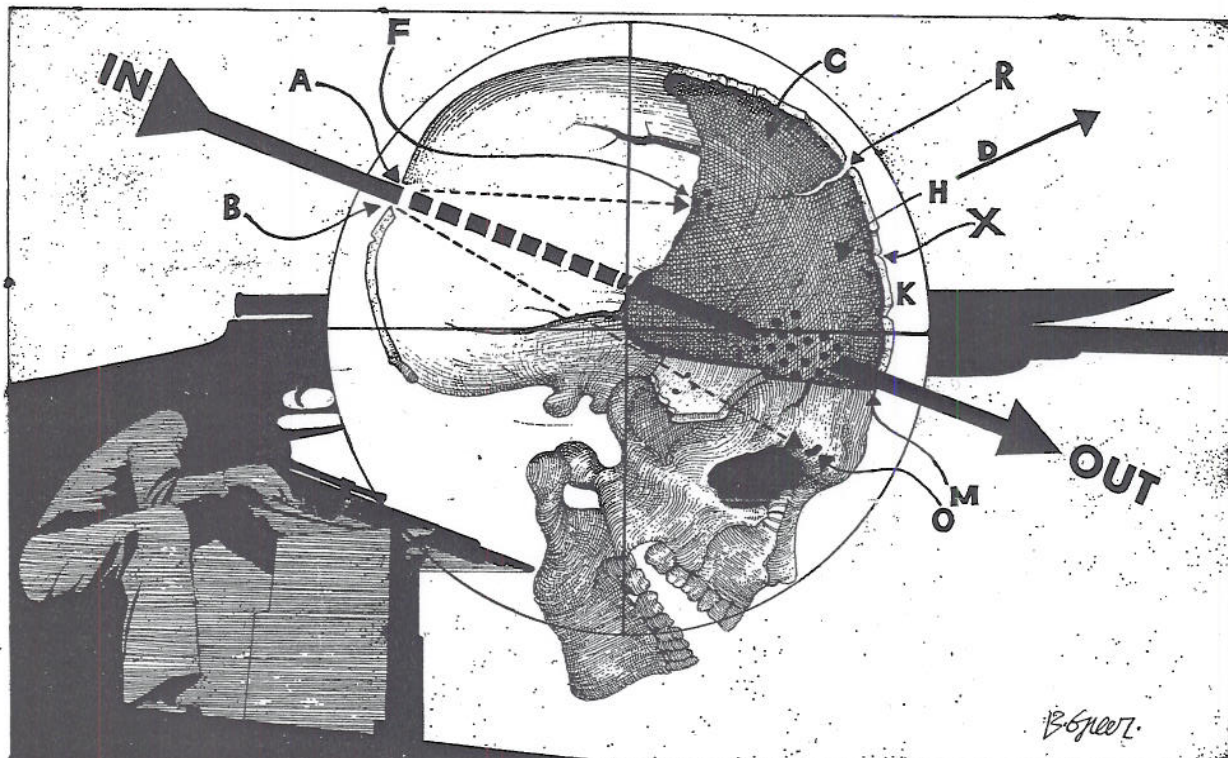


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An Assassin's Diary

By Arthur H. Bremer.
With an Introduction by Harding Lemay.
142 pp. New York: Harper's Magazine Press. \$6.50.

By GARRY WILLS

The "assassination buff" was one of the grisly results of President Kennedy's death. Conspiracies, right and left, were discussed and traded like baseball cards. Starting from grassy knolls and Zapruder stills, men journeyed in conjecture out through the labyrinths of Dallas, New Orleans, Havana, Moscow and Washington, sifting motives for a cast of thousands. Birchers vied with leftists in accusation. "Buff" alliances and heresies, rival theories and personal squabbles led to the sordid New Orleans prosecution of Clay Shaw.

Unappetizing as this whole thing was, its strength came from a sunny innocence. It was, for most Americans, the first Assassination; and something must be made to explain it, make it yield to reason. Better evil plotters with a plan than random evil in the universe. Polls revealed a perverse wish to believe in plots—not for paranoid titillation, but for solace. Men vaguely believed "they" were still out there

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plotting, and that very belief let them go cheerfully about their business.

People still thought man was in charge of things, back then—a claim that John Kennedy's own brash assertiveness encouraged. But only a few crazed devotees raised the specter of a plot when Arthur Bremer shot down Gov. George Wallace. The leads were there (they always will be)—e.g., where did Bremer, a 21-year-old unemployed busboy from Milwaukee, get his money? Ideology can be tortured from his notes—as from Harvey Lee Oswald's. Bremer tried for Nixon before Wallace, just as Oswald tried for General Walker before Kennedy.

The difference is not in the crimes themselves, but in ourselves. We are old hands at this by now. Violent political death is just a fact of life, and the assassins are dreadfully the same—losers no self-respecting conspiracy could rely on, people who "lucked into" a chance at evil fame. The motorcade route that went by Oswald's warehouse was as fortuitous as Robert Kennedy's shortcut through the kitchen. Assassination is a multiple option test: Better a king than a commoner, but Speck will take mere nurses, and the man in the Austin tower settled for whoever happened by. Capote's pair of killers came

out of prison like James Earl Ray. Bremer's notes show disgust that he could only get Wallace—not someone as big as Nixon or J. Edgar Hoover.

Assassination has almost become boring—its devotees need kinky variants, like those who need ever-new sexual perversions to excite them. So we get the camp assassination attempt on Warhol, or the Manson murders. (The family that kills together stays together.) Even the ritual murdering of children has returned (in Abdul Jabbar's house). But one never gets back the fresh thrill. These are all little murders now (in Feiffer's phrase). Murder itself has shrunk in moral stature. Our Raskolnikovs are diagnosed as "loners" trying to get attention, or used to criticize our social violence—Bremer is blamed on his own first target, Richard Nixon, mad stalker for a mad bomber.

These are all the mind's tricks, trying to soothe itself with patterns. If we cannot have a plot, we can at least classify a type, a recurrent exception, predictable if not accounted for—something we have to allow for in our calculations. By typing these men, we gain distance from them, reduce their individuality to some shared quirk, a problem in human mechanics. Bremer's brief vivid diary is a corrective to this dodge. It takes us, with no effort, inside a killer's mind—and we find ourselves at home there.

G. K. Chesterton's detective, Father Brown, said he searched out criminals by participating in the moral

feelings of the crime—sinning in the mind, to repent ahead of time. This "spiritual exercise," as Father Brown called it, is forced on us by the eerie convincing individuality of Arthur Bremer. His is the voice, not of evil's banality, but of its plausibility. One fears with and for him in his scrapes. He is not a distant type, but a smothered reminder. All murders are little, and done by little men. He worries about what to wear, like a teen-ager going to a dance. He watches himself, so others will not watch him. It is all so familiar.

"Came out & went inside again. Longjohn weather. I was conscience of my hands. Didn't want to keep them inside of my pockets & get searched. Didn't want to keep them out & nume them too much. Some folks there kept their hands in their pockets almost all the time, they weren't questioned & either was I. But I wanted to be careful, didn't know if a stop & frisk law existensed or what my rights were as an American here [he is in Canada]. Felt added confidence with my suit on & short hair & shave."

Bremer tries out roles under pressure, human constructions of control. Scared by the coy whoring of a "massage parlor" girl, he first tried to insult her, then works for superiority by "protecting" her. Resentful that his "tip" did not work, he persuades himself it was a donation; plays the noble renouncer, the semi-anonymous benefactor. In New York, awed by the big town, he tries to control the scene by describing it, in one of his conscious

literary poses. ("Litter abounds.") Ignorance has not precluded all the maneuvers of a writer. What impressed him about a Sirhan biography is not the assassin being described, but the skill of description: "A good man with a pen."

He resorts to puns and poems to keep his story interesting (to himself first of all). Bremer is writing his own life as a way of living it, and he needs a plot that goes somewhere. He gets puzzled as his narrative escapes him: "Like a novelist who knows not how his book will end—I have written this journal—what a shocking surprish that my inner character [Wallace?] shall steal the climax and destroy the author and save the anti-hero [Nixon?] from assassination!"

What shocks is the ease with which normal human pettinesses add up to murder—sudden anger attaching itself to any object, the working out of private grudges through political symbols, the taking of revenge upon "the world," the finding of constructive aspects in any action (Bremer will teach lax security officers a lesson), the enlistment of moral fervor in any task (like Horatio Alger, Bremer writes "Damn this town! It isn't going to get me down!").

When one considers the times Bremer failed (six "sightings" of Nixon alone), his perseverance, the evil luck of the assassins who succeeded, it becomes evident that many other assassins out there have just missed their chance, or got discouraged before it came. The exception comes nearer and nearer to the norm. And no wonder. In his spooky letters to the Thessalonians (the earliest Christian writings that we have), St. Paul is not surprised by the hidden plan of disorder (*mystérion tés anomias*), but only that it has been held in check so far.

We have come a long way from our naive reaction to Oswald, we "positive-thinking" Americans—but not, yet, far enough. Evil is not only plausible but obvious—look at any child's tantrum. Good is the exception and achievement; the effort at growth and education, the lessening of tantrums. Bremer is an Everyboy who stuck, kicking, at that marginal point where others slip over into uncertain manhood. His diary is one long rationalizing of tantrums. His words deliver the banal mystery of stalled growth, the dark reality of "Peter Pan"—not much less happy, really, than we are; and not much more flawed or evil; just enough.

If we pretend we do not recognize these traits, we are lying to ourselves. Father Brown would have recognized them. He said it is every man's task to capture a certain criminal, and imprison him—under one's own hat. ■

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