

A Spirit of Unreason

For many Americans, the publication of the Warren Commission report has brought back all the agony, dismay and heartbreak they suffered during the days immediately following President Kennedy's assassination. A mood of national introspection settled upon the country during that painful time. We asked ourselves what had happened to America that it could produce such a senseless deed. We asked how hatred could so poison the springs of public life that any individual could substitute naked violence for the peaceful processes of a mature democracy.

The questions still linger, all the more so as hatred, intolerance and irrationality are today being systematically injected into a presidential campaign that is too bitter for our national good health.

Lee Harvey Oswald was a "loner," and the Warren Commission makes an indisputable case for the conclusion that he represented no conspiracy, foreign or domestic. This will disappoint the right wing which liked to believe that the assassination was a Communist plot, and Communists who attributed it to a fascist plot, but most Americans will accept the overwhelmingly persuasive evidence that Oswald acted for nobody but himself.

What he did represent, however, was a spirit of unreason, a political absolutism, a harsh and violent nihilism which are fundamentally incompatible with the assumptions and postulates of a self-governing democracy. He stood for violent irrationality, and no matter whether irrationality be of the left or of the right, it is hostile to the very foundations of a free society. Unless men can reconcile their differences within a broadly acceptable framework of reason, and then live by the democratic consensus thus achieved, they become victims of totalitarian tyranny.

Oswald isolated himself from our society and expressed his irrational absolutism with a rifle shot. Others do the same by substituting hatred for political debate, by resorting to intellectual rather than physical violence, by exploiting prejudice, emotion and fear for political ends.

Their absolutism is equally poisonous for democracy whether it speaks for the left or for the right. Just at this moment in history it is the shame of America that wealthy and presumably well educated persons are lending themselves to a fringe fanaticism of the right which rejects the principles of democracy as fundamentally as does an assassin. They believe that "extremism in defense of liberty is no vice," a proposition to which Lee Harvey Oswald could have subscribed without reservation.

This week is a good time to reflect on the words of Chief Justice Warren at President Kennedy's bier:

"If we really love this country, if we truly love justice and mercy, if we fervently want to make this nation better for those who are to follow us, we can at least abjure the hatred that consumes people, the false accusations that divide us and the bitterness that begets violence.

"Is it too much to hope that the martyrdom of our beloved President might even soften the hearts of those who would themselves recoil from assassination, but who do not shrink from spreading the venom which kindles thoughts of it in others?"