

VIOLENCE IN OUR TIME AND OUR COUNTRY

The most shocking thing about the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy was that it did not catch us totally by surprise. Not only had we been conditioned by previous killings of public figures—Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, George Lincoln Rockwell, John F. Kennedy, the list could be extended—but evidence of violence is our daily diet. A large part of our nation has come to feel that we are living at a time when the violence in which America is involved has taken on special qualities. The difficulty, of course, is in making that determination and assessment correctly. It is intolerable to feel that we are simply being swept along on a tide of headlines, news stories, T.V. reports, fact, rumor and speculation about violence in this country. We are driven to seek those obscure forces that direct these tides within our nation.

In considering the assessments that have so far been made it is clear that though one's vantage point is not all important it is significant. We have been told, for example, that we are a violent people with a violent history; the present is simply a continuation of the past. We have been instructed that America is the most violent nation the world has ever seen just as we have been instructed that our attention to domestic violence indicates an awareness, a sensitivity that few nations could match.

To probe our national history and psyche is not a useless activity. But it would be misleading if it directed our attention away from those areas where the violent energies of the nation are today most evident and most concentrated—in poverty and racism at home and, abroad, in the war in Vietnam. Not many months before he was slain Robert Kennedy said, at a conference devoted to racial justice, that “if we as a nation say that it is justified in killing thousands and thousands of people 12,000 miles from our own country, then it becomes a rather more acceptable instrument for change within the United States itself.”

Senator Kennedy was aware that many of the alienated and disenfranchised in this country made exactly this connection. He, and they, posited a relation between the use of force domestically and the use of force internationally that not all people would conceive of, let alone agree with. President Johnson, for example, said after Robert Kennedy's death that “a nation that tolerates violence in any form cannot expect to be able to confine it to just minor outbursts.” It is evident that when the President made that statement he was thinking less of Vietnam than of the riots and strikes that have spread through urban centers and universities. His is a

common mode of thinking which separates, which isolates, in some odd fashion, world affairs from what are regarded as peculiarly domestic problems.

There are other deep divisions which separate thoughtful people who attempt to cope with the problem of violence in our time. One of these deep divisions is formed by differing attitudes about the relative importance of maintaining law and order in society. In his brief pamphlet "Concerning Dissent and Civil Disobedience," Justice Abe Fortas argued the traditional thesis that our scheme of law is one of our nation's glories, a bulwark of a citizen's freedoms. "The achievement of liberty," he wrote, "is man's indispensable condition of living; and yet, liberty cannot exist unless it is restrained and restricted. The instrument of balancing these two conflicting values is the law . . . the rule of law is the essential condition of individual liberty as it is of the existence of the state."

This traditional thesis, so ably stated by Justice Fortas, has come under increasing attack. Edgar Z. Friedenberg, professor of education and sociology at the State University of New York, recently hit that thesis head-on. "Respect for law," he said, "has become one of the nastiest features of the American character. Anything we can get legitimated passes without question. . . . The American ideological insistence that we live in a classless society has obscured for us the fact that law is an instrument of social policy which functions by providing access to *force majeure*—in the nature of things, usually on the side of the most powerful. Law is, among other things, instant violence; and worshipers of law and order are worshipers of violence . . . so long as that violence is used to defend existing social arrangements."

Although Mr. Friedenberg's words will sound harsh to ears unaccustomed to hearing such sentiments, these sentiments are shared by a significant minority within the country. This minority, too, is composed primarily of those who are among or who sympathize with the least favored groups in our society. From their vantage point, the structure of law is frequently seen as threatening and oppressive, not liberating.

One could add to these disparate views of the role of violence in our society today, but they would not alter the conclusion that one's own vantage point is as important as perception and disciplined reflection. Nor would they alter the

conclusion that the immediate causes are found in conditions which are to some degree remediable. Concentrated attention on violence in our society will be helpful only to the degree that it propels us to cope with those conditions—of war, poverty, racism—on the vast scale that they deserve.

J.F.

GRADUALLY IT'S SUDDEN

Those who have been defending our political system over the last several years are now in a precarious position. For without denying its creaky faults and imperfections they have asserted that the political system was relatively open and able to respond to significant pressures. They acknowledged that disproportionate power of various kinds existed, but the ultimate power ultimately lay with the electorate at the ballot box.

But how slow most of us are to learn, how difficult for us to recognize "significant pressure" when it exists, how reluctant to acknowledge the severe limitations on the popular electorate! All of these melancholy reflections flow out of the experiences of the last several years. The protest movement was vigorous for many months before those who analyze political movements in traditional terms realized what it was doing. And then its efforts were patronizingly analyzed into relative insignificance.

When out of the conditions partially created by that movement Senator McCarthy entered the Presidential campaign he too was coolly analyzed and diminished. Even after President Johnson withdrew from the race, Senator Kennedy entered, and Senator McCarthy won unexpected and impressive victories, McCarthy was not taken seriously as a candidate. Not until the New York primaries—which followed the pattern initiated in New Hampshire—did many important commentators take him seriously. They suddenly perceived what had been available to their senses for some time. As it becomes increasingly clear, however, the nomination of the Democratic candidate for President will be accomplished through a process which may ignore the deep ferment and intense activity that has thrown into question the "old politics." It becomes increasingly difficult to defend that process as the best that the ingenuity of man can provide.