

--- Assaassination and After ---

In the aftermath of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, there are ~~a number of~~ ^{Some} aspects of the situation that strike me as being of importance and concern. One is a rather personal matter, and one that I am reluctant to mention, except that it bears upon a ~~much more important~~ ~~aspect~~ ^{of the situation.} The preliminary matter has to do with ~~criticism I received~~ ^{done} for not having more in the way of a memorial tribute and some service of comfort and solace immediately following upon the assassination of President Kennedy. Admittedly I did very little, but I did a good deal more than might have occurred. For on the Friday that President Kennedy was assassinated, I was near flat with the flu and if I had had any replacement for the Sunday morning service, I would have been in bed and would have remained there for a number of days. On the Saturday, as a matter of fact, ~~xxxx~~ an out of town visiting Unitarian official invited himself to do the Sunday morning service, and I was no little tempted to accept his wholly unexpected and possibly life-saving offer, but I declined, feeling the obligation to carry through with the morning service as announced and seeking to make it somewhat relevant to the tragedy and shock of that week-end. Undoubtedly the effort was inadequate, and in the minds of some I should have been doing a special service on the Monday. However, by Sunday afternoon I was more in need of bed than ever before, and beyond that on Saturday night I had been informed of the death, after days of sorrowful waiting, of one of the members of this Society, for whom a memorial service would have to be done on Wednesday. Had I been one who was expected to read some set service for the dead, I might have been able to handle both

services, but with me, doing a memorial service requires a considerable amount of preparation and work, and the ~~getting through~~ ^{doing} of that ^{on} wednesday was almost more than I could handle. (For a Unitarian minister, who has no presumed reliance upon supernatural support, the factors of time and human effort are very real in what can be attempted and accomplished.) And although as the hired minister of this Society, I might have felt an obligation to do an attempted service of comfort and solace relative to the death of the President of the United States, I felt an even greater obligation to do a service of possible help to more specific members of the Society who had a more intimate grief. If some hold me to be wrong in this, I can only say that it was a matter of necessity and ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ priority.

What bothered me in some of the ~~criticism that came to me~~ ^{criticism} was the implication that I was insensitive to grief and less than ~~xxxx~~ respectful to the memory of the President of the United States. This becomes a matter of degree and interpretation. Some years ago when Gandhi was assassinated, I felt grief but it could not be the grief of those who were close to him; when I read about the assassination of Lincoln, I feel grief, but it is a grief drained across a century of history and removed from the immediacy of shock; with the assassination of President Kennedy, I ~~of course~~, felt grief. It could not be the grief felt by his immediate family and friends, but it was a grief deeper than I felt for Gandhi and possibly ~~even~~ deeper than I have felt for Lincoln. Of course, I felt grief, as I have felt grief in countless human sorrows and sufferings.

But grief, it seems to me, should have limits upon its display, even by those who grieve the most and it must be absorbed into a continuity of life that still makes its demands upon us.

As for the Presidency of the United States, I trust that I have only the highest regard for that office. It is an office that deserves and requires honor and respect as symbol of the highest, and hopefully, of the best in democratic leadership. True with virtually everyone else, I have not always agreed with everything said and done by the occupant of that office, and I was not without ^{some} moments of dismay and disappointment with President Kennedy. Nevertheless, I had a vast amount of respect for the energy, and intelligence, and social vision that he brought to the office, and I had high hope that in another term of office he would be able to forward many of his programs, and I had ^{little} ~~no~~ question that he might attain to the stature of ~~xxxxxxx~~ being one of the truly great presidents in United States history. His assassination, as the murder of any human being, was an evil deed. It cut him from life, cut him from the possible fullfilling ~~his~~ of ^{his} potentialities. Even so, his courage and his laughter, and his dedication to peace freedom justice, and reason were enough to make his memory honored and unforgettable. Respect for his memory, as far as I am concerned, is not something to be maintained through the naming of airports, bridges, libraries, and capes after him, or by the burning of an eternal flame at his grave, ~~xxxxxx~~ but rather through a pressing for the purposes which he championed during his life ~~of~~ of justice under law, greater equality ~~and~~ of oppor-

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tunity, and peace and hope among men.

What bothered me the most was when someone sent me an unsigned note in which it was said that "It has been ...suggested that your anti-Catholocism has gotten the better of you and that you cannot grieve a violent end simply because the man was Roman." Following upon that word Roman, I assume there is implicit the additional term Catholic, since quite obviously President Kennedy was not a Roman in a geographical-citizenship sense of that term, and there is nothing, I am sure, in anything that I have ever said that could make me seem to be prejudiced against Romans per se. About the matter of not being able to grieve the end, violent or otherwise, of someone because he was a Roman Catholic, I can only make categorical denial. I have grieved at the death of ^{any} ~~any~~ number of individuals who were Roman Catholics. I have grieved for them as friends, as individuals for whom I had liking and respect, and the matter of their being Roman Catholics ^{had} had nothing whatsoever to do with my feelings toward them.

About my so-called "anti-Catholocism", I am indeed disheartened if that is a label applied to me. True, I have many times been critical of Roman Catholic doctrine, and even more of the social implications of such doctrine, but I have ever sought to be honest, and fair, and open in my criticism and I have always acknowledged, and not only acknowledged but defended, the full right of Roman Catholicism to expression of its views and its criticisms in a free market of ideas. I have ever opposed the bigotry, and prejudice and denial of rights

that so many times have characterized anti-Catholicism, and I have ever defended the principle of religious freedom for Roman Catholics as for others within the cultural plurality of American life.

The real irony of the situation is that almost exactly four years ago, when then Senator Kennedy was in the campaign for the Presidency and there was a vast amount of opposition to his becoming President because he was Roman Catholic, I did a Sunday morning address in which, without taking a partisan position of urging support of Senator Kennedy, I nevertheless supported the Constitutional provision ~~that~~ "...no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States", and said that judgement of any presidential candidate should be on the basis of his record, ability, and professed intention, and not on his religious affiliation or lack of religious affiliation, and I went on to indicate why I was confident that if Senator Kennedy were elected President he would bend over backward to uphold the Constitution, and not least of all the Constitutional principle having to do with separation of church and state. Following upon that address I received a considerable number of really nasty letters, with an avalanche of supplementary material, all of which informed me that I had become a tool of Roman Catholicism, that I was blind to its Machiavellian intent, and that I had better get out of the Unitarian ministry and openly seek employment on the Kennedy payroll.

To get away from this rather personal involvement in the situation, to which I have perhaps given too much attention, but which may have served to sweep

some of the deck clean again, there is the fact that President Kennedy, as the first Roman Catholic elected to that office, did uphold the Constitution and thereby did a considerable amount ~~to~~ puncture some of the religious bigotries that have entered into a consideration of those who might hope to attain to that office.

He was courageously forthright about the matter. In an article for Look magazine, some five years ago, he stated that whatever his religious views might be, nothing transcended an officeholder's obligation to uphold the Constitutional oath. The emphasis given was upon the term "office-holder."

He went before a somewhat hostile meeting of Protestant ministers in Houston, Texas, on Sept .12, 1960, and said:

"I believe in an America where religious intolerance will someday end--- where all men and all churches are treated as equal--- where every man has the same right to attend or not to attend the church of his choice--- where there is no Catholic vote, no anti-Catholic vote,... and where Catholics, Protestants, and Jews.... will refrain from those attitudes of disdain and division which have so often marred their works in the past, and promote instead the American ideal of brotherhood."

Beyond that he went on to say that if as President he ever felt religiously bound to act contrary to the Constitution, ~~he~~ would resign rather than betray the oath of office. To this there was an outcry in both the Catholic and the Protestant press that God was to be served before man, and that

the Christian conscience ^{was} to be obeyed before the Constitution. This put him in a real bind as to what ~~might be~~ his action in terms of conscience and religious loyalty and his position as President of the United States. But he never deviated from his position that as far as religion was concerned he would ~~XXXXX~~ abide by the Constitution. This he did when it came to the matter of federal aid to parochial schools, declaring that it would be deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. He went to pains not to show any signs of favoritism or to give any indication that he was dominated by the hierarchy of the Roman-Catholic Church. Being the first president of the United States who happened to be Roman Catholic he bent over backward to be constitutionally correct, with the result, as some Catholics rather churlishly noted that Catholic influence under President Kennedy was weaker than it very well might have been under a man of different faith.

That President Kennedy broke through the religious barriers to the Presidency, and indicated that an individual could act with full dedication to the basic principles of the Constitution without constrictions from the more parochial interest of ^{a particular} some religious affiliation, seems to me to be ^{among} the very greatest of his accomplishments. Strictly speaking, the matter of religious affiliation or lack of religious affiliation, should never have entered into consideration of a person's right for political office, but insofar as it ^{did} ~~has~~, and up until the election of Mr. Kennedy had decidedly weighed against any

Roman Catholic becoming President of the United States, there is no question that Mr. Kennedy will go down ~~in~~ in history as the first American President who was a Roman Catholic. Even for nothing else he will be recorded for this fact. But the fact that he was a very capable president, because of or despite of or irrespective of his particular religious affiliation, will also have mention. And in the immediate context, it greatly lowers the barriers to ~~someone~~^{anyone} else who might be a Roman Catholic but who would aspire to high office. By logical extension, ~~of course~~, it would make the office of presidency open to anyone--not only to someone who might be a Roman Catholic, but to someone who might be a Jew, or to someone who might be an avowed atheist, or even to someone who combines the added features of being a female and also a Christian Scientist. I only hope I live to the day when the President of the United States happens to be rather incidentally both female and Christian Scientist!

There is a reverse twist to ~~this~~^{the} matter, however, that is just about as bad as that from which we have ~~been~~^{been} started to move. Whereas with Mr. Kennedy there was a seeming breakthrough of the religious barrier, which would allow an individual to become president of the United States on the basis of qualifications rather apart from consideration of his religious affiliation, now the matter of religious affiliation comes ~~into~~^{to} the fore again. This is particularly the case with a Roman Catholic affiliation. The very success of Mr. Kennedy, both as Senator and then as President of the United States, and also

being a Roman Catholic, has generated a reverse ~~xxxxxx~~ twist on the former ^{belly} ~~notion~~ that being a Roman Catholic was a political liability to the conviction that being a Roman Catholic is a real political asset. Thus there is no little ~~open~~ discussion, although with nothing yet settled, that in the forthcoming presidential campaign there must be a Roman Catholic running mate with the presidential candidate on the Democratic ticket, and there is extension of the same kind of talk to the Republican ticket. Prior to 1960, the party pros very decidedly looked upon a Roman Catholic affiliation as a kiss of death for anyone who might be considered for the two highest offices in the land. Today they rather decidedly feel that they must have a Roman Catholic, and ^{specifically} emphasized as being a Roman Catholic, on the ticket in order to attract votes and make more likely the winning of ~~the~~ ^{an} election.

According to the Protestant publication Christian Century, this is a "new, subtle yet virulent form of religious bigotry". And in like manner the Catholic publication America has voiced its contempt for this kind of ticket balancing with the following comment:

"It is gratifying that a man's Catholic faith is no longer an obstacle to the highest federal office. We credit Mr. Kennedy with burying that issue....But we should regret to see it rise again in a new form, this time turned inside out. A candidate's Catholic faith should not become a qualification for office. It

should neither block his way nor ease him onto the ticket. If the

old religious issue was shameful, its new version is ridiculous."

Indeed it would be more than ridiculous if we were to turn religious affiliation into a stepping stone to political office. This could be the same kind of religious discrimination and bigotry that was so long exercised on behalf of some Protestant affiliation and against Roman Catholic affiliation, but now turned inside out on behalf of Roman Catholic affiliation, ~~withxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ could become a discriminatory advantage to one group and a new added barrier to others. if it is to be taken for granted that both major parties are to have running mates who are respectively selected on the basis of Protestant and Catholic affiliation, this would rather decidedly limit the possibility of anyone who did not fall into these two categories from running for the highest offices in the land. It would be ironical, and certainly no honor to the memory of President Kennedy, if his breaking of the religious barrier to the presidency for Roman Catholics were to be transformed into a primary qualification for such office.

Of far more serious concern has been the re-emergence of right wing extremism almost immediately following upon the assassination of President Kennedy.

President Johnson, in his first address to Congress, may have made the same kind of plea that many others were making "Let us turn away from the fanatics of the far left and the far right, from the apostles of bitterness and bigotry, from those ~~defiant~~ ^{defiant} of law and those who pour venom into our nation's blood stream", but before the ^{sun} 30 days of national mourning for President Kennedy had

come to an end, the John Birch Society, for instance, moved out of a temporary silence into a full page advertisement, published in the New York Times and a dozen other papers. The ad stated that the Communist Party had ordered President Kennedy's assassination, and it went on to say:

"Nor is it in character for the Communists to rest on this success. Instead, we can expect them to use the shock, grief, and confusion of the American people, resulting from the assassination of our President, as an opportunity for pushing their own plans faster. Also, we shall be subjected to an ever greater barrage of distortions and falsehoods, aimed at imposing on the nation a completely false picture of the situation and of the forces at work."

According to the ad, it was now proved that the Birchers had been right all along, and it appealed to all red-blooded Americans to react as such, and at least to send some money.

The ad was an exact description of what the John Birch society itself was up to"... to use the shock, grief, and confusion of the American people, resulting from the assassination of our President, as an opportunity for pushing their own plans faster". It was ~~xxxxxx~~ in the words of an editorial in the Christian Century an ad that reflected "incredible hypocrisy", for it sought to exploit the death of a man it had vilified in life as a procommunist or an appeaser of communists. Until the very day of his death President Kennedy was one of the targets of the John Birch Society. According to Newsweek, his

murder caught the Birchers issuing the December number of their magazine ,American Opinion, with references evidently so abusive to the late President that they called back and suppressed the whole press run. An article in the September issue said that a physical beating administered to President Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kenney, would be " a fine thing for our country". And in the June issue there was a piece by Westbrook Pegler, which even expressed regret over the failure of the 1933 assassination attempt on Franklin D. Roosevelt-- Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak, who was killed, "stopped the bullet which might have saved the world", wrote Pegler.

President Kennedy, as he himself knew, was hated by ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ right wing extremists because of his seeking some working settlement with the Soviet Union, because of his support of civil rights, and because of many of his social-economic proposals. And yet these same extremists who formerly accused Kennedy of being soft on Communism, now claim that communism killed him, and they ~~xxxxxxx~~ would exploit his death in order to gain support for their further sowing of rancor and fear and distrust.

This aspect of the situation remains with us, irrespective of who killed President Kennedy and for what reason. The right-wing has only felt its hand strengthened with the charge that the alleged assassin of the President was a communist, acting under orders.

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 However there is a considerable number of aspects of the situation that

still remain clouded with uncertainty and need to be clear⁴d up, so far as that is possible. There was the haste, for instance, with which th Dallas police depart^{ment} said the assassina^{tion} of President Kenneday had been closed with the death of Harvey Lee Oswald. This was indeed a quck closing of a case, particualy under the circumstances that two days after the assassination, Oswald in turn was murdered while in^{the} custody of the Dallas police. Did Ruby shoot the handcuffed Oswald in the Dallas police station to silence him: or was Ruby telling the truth when he siad he did it to avenge the death of the rresident? Could Oswald, if it were he, have fired three, some say four, shots in five seconds with such deadly ~~xxxxxx~~ aim with a cheap Italian bolt-action rifle^{from} a distance of some bne hundred yards at a moving target? Where did Oswald, who never had other than small paying jobs, find the money to make a trip to Russia, and when he decided to come back to this country, how was it that he was made a loan by the United States Embassy in Moscow, and how did he manage to pay it back within a short time after his return, when he was unemployeed most of the time? Where did he find the money for a recent trip to Mexico C^{ity}? What was his relation to the FBI? According to a report which appeared in the Philadelphia In^{quirer} the FBI made an attempt to recruit Oswald as an informant in Spetmeber, just after he had moved to Dallas from New Orleans. Other reports indicate that the FBI was in fairly constant touch with Oswald's activities. And yet the follow^{ing} news-story issued from Washington, and appearing ⁱⁿ the

New York Times says*

"The Federal Bureau of Investigation gave the Secret Service a risk list of Dallas individuals in advance of President Kennedy's fatal trip, but the list did not include the name of Lee H. Oswald.

An official source explained today that Oswald's name, like many others in the Dallas file, had been omitted because the FBI found nothing in Oswald's background to mark him as a potential assassin...

Oswald was not under surveillance by the FBI at the time of President's Kennedys visit to Dallas, the FBI noted. Months of checking by the FBI had indicated that Oswald was neither a spy nor a saboteur. That, it was said, covered the statutory area of FBI responsibility."

Was the alleged assassin of President Kennedy employed by the FBI? Can there be certainty that Oswald was the assassin? If so was he a loner whose actions can be explained adequately simply as those of an unstable malcontent with an ingrained hatred for authority? Or was someone else the assassin? Or was there someone else involved with Oswald.? Was it a communist directed plot? Or was it a right wing extremist conspiracy, designed not only to remove President Kennedy from the political scene, but with the intent of heating up the Cold War?

We would like to know the answers. The Warren commission, appointed by President Johnson to investigate the assassination of President Kennedy and to

satisfy itself that the truth is known as far as it can be discovered", has now begun its sessions. According to a New York Times report "Much of the commission's work may consist in sifting and analyzing a report by the Federal Bureau of Investigation on the assassination and the events surrounding it." A special editorial in the January issue of Commentary raises some questions about this procedure. "Is the FBI to act, in effect, as the commission's staff? Are no public hearings to be held. Will no effort be made to evaluate the job that was done by the Secret Service, the Dallas Police, and the FBI itself? Is the possibility of a treasonous political conspiracy to be ruled out, (simply on the already leaked part of the FBI report which says that Oswald, acting in his own lunatic loneliness, was indeed the President's assassin?)

And the editorial goes on to say:

Not the least fantastic aspect of this whole fantastic nightmare is

~~the~~ ease with which respectable opinion in America has arrived at the conclusion that (the possibility of a treasonous political conspiracy) is absurd; in most other countries, what is regarded as absurd is the idea that the assassination could have been anything but a political murder. The suspicions that are being openly voiced all ^{over} the world-- and ~~that~~ ~~are~~ being whispered.... all over the United States--- may never be (fully) settled, but as President Johnson implicitly acknowledged in making the the decision to appoint the Warren commission, it is

absolutely essential that they be confronted. And the way to confront them is not by a simple review of what the FBI has to say about the case; it is by independent investigation of the most scrupulous and painstaking kind that culminates in a lengthy report in which every question involved in the assassination is examined with microscopic thoroughness and according to the highest standards of judicial impartiality. The Warren commission ought to know that anything less would only reinforce the ugly suspicions circulating through the air, and would only compound the shame and disgust that all of us should be feeling--- still."

The full and complete story of the Assassination of John F. Kennedy is far from having been told, and we are well advised to maintain a critical and skeptical attitude until it is told. Meanwhile the atmosphere is still being filled with slander and invective and the twin monsters of hatred and violence. Such is the real debasing of the memory of John Kennedy. Such could be a disastrous killing off of the very best in the American democratic tradition and a snuffing out of the American dream. To continue struggling for that tradition and for ~~xxxxxx~~ that dream is going to be no easy matter, but being no easy matter, it becomes all the more essential.