

# Off Center

Sol Plafkin

1968

Of the many comments made following the shooting of Sen. Kennedy, perhaps the most incisive was given by Sen. McCarthy:

“It is not enough in my judgment to say that this was the act of one deranged man, if that is the case. The nation, I think, bears too great a burden of guilt, really, for the kind of neglect which has allowed the disposition to grow here in one’s own land, in part a reflection of violence which we have visited upon the rest of the world, or at least one part of the world.” Sen. McCarthy was talking about the violence that America has been and is still inflicting in Vietnam.

And, McCarthy could have added, violence has also been a way of life inside our own nation, with the continuous and ever-escalating brutalization of Blacks and poor and student whites.

Not-so-radical Black columnist Carl Rowan agrees with Sen. McCarthy that “this spirit of violence is not the product of hoodlums or escapees from mental wards.”

Then Rowan focused on the internal savagery of our nation by condemning “the leadership of many segments of our society who made verbal and physical violence tolerable, if not fashionable.”

“Fourteen years ago, after our highest court outlawed public school segregation, we saw governors and legislatures preaching ugly defiance of the law. We saw newspaper editors and senators saying that before they would submit to social change ‘blood will flow in the streets.’

“Thus invited, the haters and hoodlums moved quickly to dominate societies.”

James Reston, of the *New York Times*, commented:

“Robert F. Kennedy is only the latest victim of a modern world that has turned loose greater forces than it can control. The struggles between nations, between the races, between the rich and the poor, between the individual and bewildering change have produced a plague of lawlessness and violence that is now sweeping the globe. The pressures of all this are too much for weak and demented minds.

“...Evidence of the use of force to achieve personal, group, or national ends is all around us: in the war in Vietnam...(and)...the fantasy violence of American literature, television, and the movies provides a contemporary gallery of dark and ghastly crime, which undoubtedly adds to the atmosphere in which weak and deranged minds flourish.”

Reston sees a limited sort of hope emerging from the assassination. The public “has been startled once more into reflection about the violence and banalities of traditional politics and the purpose and priorities of public life.”

He feels that “this more solemn attitude is likely, moreover, to work against the continued violence of the war and thus help Senator McCarthy in his campaign for peace and the White House.”

If Sen. McCarthy were to achieve the miracle of the Democratic nomination and the Presidency, then perhaps there might be a brief respite in the calamitous convergence of domestic and international disputants, waiting impatiently for him to accomplish the quadruple-miracle of peaceful revolutionary change.

If he fails in reaching his alleged goals of President, or even sooner if he is denied the nomination, America could become another Vietnam, and Washington, D.C., another Saigon. (Black militant “Catfish” Mayfield said when the Washington riot started, “S asked me what it’s gonna be like, and I say this is the first time Washington had a riot, so don’t expect too much this time—just wait for the next time.”)

The violence—now that the tragic pattern has been set—can only be ended when, in the words of the 1962 SDS Port Huron manifesto, there is “the establishment of a democracy of individual participation governed by two central aims: that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; that society be organized to encourage independence of men and provide the media for their common participation.”

The evil was not in man, the Port Huron statement said. He was “infinitely precious and possessed of unfulfilled capacities of reason, freedom and love and unrealized potential for self-direction.” But the evil, it said, lay with the bureaucratic institutions run for the benefit of the elites.

And these institutions—which themselves are maintained and sustained by violence—must come “tumbling down,” a growing minority of militant Americans seems to be crying, by whatever means are necessary.

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