

# The Algiers Motel Incident

book review

James D. Nixon

1968

a review of

*The Algiers Motel Incident* by John Hersey. 397 pages, Hardbound, \$5.95 Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Paperback, \$1.25, Bantam Books

Language is loaded with euphemisms, and the title of John Hersey's *The Algiers Motel Incident* is a prime example. "Algiers" suggests an Afro-orientation, but "Incident" is the stinger. Albert Cleage writes of "the Algiers motel massacre", and in mid-August of 1967 Doc Greene began a *Detroit News* column with a sentence which contained a likely title: "The thing that gets me about the Algiers Motel slayings of Aubrey Pollard, Fred Temple, and Carl Cooper is the superb manner in which the police set about solving these homicides." The irony builds in that article.

"Should he or should he not have written and published at this time?" is the question being tossed about currently concerning Hersey, better known for his *Hiroshima* and other works. It's a senseless question; he's done it, and this is no subject for academic questions. The only sensible question remaining is, "What are we going to do about it?"

There is a certain gutless kind of thinking behind a question like that, anyway. Confronted with the account of three Negro youths killed in a building crawling with Detroit city police, State Troopers, National Guardsmen and others there is no place for the luxury of patience. Try for a little shock and fury, and if they don't come easily read it again. Only this time try to think of one of those dead boys as your brother. For he is, you know.

The "Should he?" bit is all a part of the game. By the same set of reasons Doc Greene shouldn't have written his column, nor should *Esquire Magazine* have discussed this affair in the March, 1968 issue. *Trans-Action* reported the incident in its issue of September, 1967: they could have been wrong too; and so could a judge who calls a press conference to announce postponement of the trial of a police officer under indictment for murder in the case.

According to the newscaster, Judge Columbo gave suspended officer Robert Paille a continuance on about July 7, 1968 and postponed the trial to January, 1969. Something about not being able to get a fair trial with this book out, reportedly called it "yellow-dog journalism", and was going to call it to the attention of the bar association. So at least the concept of "fair trial" is still around, it appears. But not for three slain at the motel, whose only crime was to be black and, along with several friends, in the company of two white girls.

At least one ingredient in the defense game is delay, and if this book hadn't come along, another pretext could have been found. It happens all the time: an attorney is sick or away, or in another court room.

Then, also, there is the theory that without the book, a more speedy trial would have naturally come about. The opposite can always be argued: with the book there are new pressures for trial, if not by the state, then by the federal government on other but related charges.

Hersey has been criticized for his style, and there is room for it, if you can muster the objectivity of reading it as though it were about something that had happened elsewhere, or a hundred years ago. But it didn't, and wasn't.

It was here, in Detroit—on Woodward Avenue a few months before, as Hersey was writing. And the principals are still walking around.

So he gathered the data tortuously, piece by piece. It was about police panic during the 1967 Detroit riot, then opportunism in the venting of all the sick feelings infesting a sick society. And it ended in deaths, with nothing but those feelings as the motives. No one seems to be suggesting that “unknown persons” committed the crime.

Riding in Hersey’s mind was the aim to let the story come through, of what happened to whom and by whom, when and where.

Many a brain could have reorganized the tale, and numerous reviewers have recommended it. Robert Conot concludes his review (for *The New York Times*) with, “As it stands, *The Algiers Motel Incident* is a book that remains to be written. Conot had described the 1965 Watts riot in his *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness*. A review of that book in *Psychology Today* had pointed to some weaknesses in his work which Conot now hurls at Hersey: “He weaves in almost too-great detail the concrete incidents, the names, the resentments...hardly scholarly sources.” He has been charged with swamping his readers with trivia, yet much of this material can be seen as a principal strength of the book as we see common people inflicting violence, brutality and death on others, not out of a sick psyche but all of this welling up out of their middle-class, American oriented background and experience.

To think that court trials growing out of these killings, sometime in the future, would complete our knowledge as to what actually happened is at least questionable, and more certainly illusory. Hersey wanted not only the story to come through, but the crunch and the smack, like the shot-gun blast tearing away one victim’s genitals. You don’t get that with pretty writing. Perhaps had he felt less urgency and wrath, Hersey might have rewritten, re-organized, and condensed his book. Perhaps he would have written pages which would have been less-tortuously read and even remembered awhile.

But he didn’t. Instead, he let Aubrey and Carl and Fred live just a little longer. Long enough to reveal the likes of officers August and Paille and Senak, and their consorts in the National Guard; and the State Troopers who “got the rest of our unit and we left” as Hersey tells us, “as we didn’t like what we had seen there.” No intervention, just cop out.

If you want to know why Hersey didn’t wait to publish, read chapter two. If you want a cast of characters and a floor-plan-of the action, Hersey gives it (you’ll need it as you make your way through the death house drama). The author’s agony is there, as the blinders come off his own middle-class eyes.

If you want it like an arty novel or a sociological analysis, it’s not your book. But if you want to know how it was—and how it is—you’d better read it, all of it, right down to Hersey’s closing question.

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