

# The Act of Violence\*

By DR. LOUIS JOLYON WEST

WHEN President John F. Kennedy was assassinated a weary month ago, the immediate reaction of the average man upon hearing the news was disbelief. Then came a profound sense of shock, loss and grief. Finally there were the inevitable questions. Why did it happen? Who was the killer? What kind of a man would do such a thing? What could be his reason for committing such a terrible crime?

I learned that the President had been slain while I was preparing this article at the request of the editor of *The Sooner Magazine*. He had already posed the same questions in terms of the widespread racial violence that has bloodied our country this year. For example, Medgar Evers, a Negro civil rights leader, was shot down in cold blood last June in Jackson, Mississippi, by another man who lay in wait with a rifle. What was *that* man's motivation?

The murders of Evers and Kennedy were remarkably similar. From what I have been able to learn, the circumstances and the assassins were much alike. Their motives, like the motives of the men who exploded dynamite in a church full of Negro children attending Sunday School in Birmingham last September, were abnormal. But abnormal motives can be understood. It is common to dismiss such acts as "insane" or their perpetrators as "fanatics." However, these individuals and their depredations can be seen to represent extreme expressions of violent emotions and actions that are actually widespread in our land. This year in the United States we can expect more than two million violent crimes, including some ten thousand murders. Forty thousand men, women and children will die in the carnage on the highways. Every 15 minutes someone will commit suicide.

Not only in America but in every coun-

try violence is found. The extent to which violent feelings and behavior are *controlled* should be a measure of sanity in an individual, and of civilization in a society. Yet "sane" individuals do commit acts of violence. "Civilized" societies also commit acts of violence that range from the legal execution of individuals to the massacre defined as modern war.

Racial violence has been the subject of considerable scientific study. Let us consider what can be learned from this painful chapter in human history, in the hope we may shed some light on our departed President's murder.

Forty thousand years ago our progenitor, *homo sapiens sapiens*, was on the move. A prowler from the depths of Asia, he rapidly replaced Neanderthal man in Europe.

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Traveling and colonizing, he pushed his way into Eastern Asia, Africa, Australia and America. One of his most noteworthy characteristics was the range of variability and individual differences that he showed. Thus, some of his fossil bones in southern France are like those of certain Negroids now living in Africa, while another European group of remains has been matched with Eskimos.

Modern man's physical variability permitted a fairly rapid process of geographical and ecological natural selection. By the end of the pleistocene epoch 10,000 years ago the evolutionary process was already marking the families of humanity according to where they had settled. Their differentiation was most distinctive on the surface of the body.

Humans in the European North were handicapped if their skin happened to be darker than average. In those latitudes, where there is insufficient annual sunshine, fair skin facilitates the production of vitamin D by absorbing more ultra-violet radiation into the living cells. Darkly pigmented skin screens out those precious rays. Thus, through the generations, Baltic brunettes got rickets, failed to breed and died out, while survival of the fittest continually favored the blondes.

On the wind-swept slopes of Asia, where dust and sand blow in the summer and ice and snow blow in the winter, high cheek bones and hooded eyes are great advantages. Through the generations such people had the edge in survival and tended to breed offspring like themselves. Basically tawny like the terrain into which they blended, their skin shades ranged from arctic ivory through oriental ocher to equatorial ebony. But the most habitable areas of their enormous continent lay intermediate between the Scandinavian pale-prefering latitudes and the negrogenic tropics. Thus the Asian in-betweens became basically neither blond nor black but brown in innumerable shades.

MEN living among the equatorial land mass (chiefly Africa since the equator runs most of its course elsewhere through ocean) were at a great disadvantage if their skin lacked protective pigmentation. Sunburn was deadly; pale coloration made it more difficult to hid or to stalk in the jungle shadows. Cancers from excessive exposure to solar radiation were much more likely to kill them young. The darker the skin—and the more plentiful the sweat glands—for equatorial man, the greater his chances for survival. Here the blacks were bred.

The foregoing is schematic, even specula-

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tive. There is much that we do not know about the evolutionary process, and we are still evolving. Nevertheless, it is clear that natural selection has led to the development of characteristics which in the narrow scope of our own contemporary view appear to define great distinctions among men and permit their classification into races. That these classifications are merely descriptions of minor group differences is clear to the objective biologist. In virtually all of his important bodily characteristics one man is very much like another. Our brains are remarkably alike and work in the same way. Our blood, despite its types, can safely be transfused between races. In fact, type O blood from a Negro donor can save a white man who would be killed by type A blood from his own brother.

A virtually unanimous opinion of the modern scientific community supports the concept that for all practical purposes the Negro and the white man are biological brothers. Their differences are little more than skin deep. These differences do not explain the racial violence that racks our country today. The explanation lies rooted rather in certain acquired characteristics of human nature and human life. The study of psycho-social attributes which predispose human beings to feel such hatred will lead to a greater understanding not only of the current racial crisis, but also of some basic mechanisms of prejudice, persecution, mob violence, murder and war.

To begin, we must appreciate the fact that the United States continues to pay a penalty for the abomination of human slavery. Slavery has been abolished for a century, but in America its curse has not yet been dissipated. The Negroes fear continued white exploitation; the whites fear Negro revenge. The Negro reacts to his subconscious feelings of inferiority—feelings beamed at him by our culture from the day of his birth—in ways ranging from apathetic disclaimers of ambition to frenetic rebelliousness. The white man reacts to his subconscious feeling of guilt—feelings related to the unearned, accidental advantage of the skin he was born with—in ways ranging from anguished efforts to further the “Negro cause” to bitter denial of white culpability and correspondingly violent antagonism toward the Negro. Even among normal men of good will in both races, unconscious emotions affect the course of events.

Slavery leaves behind it a miasma of social, economic, cultural, educational and political inequities. Such inequities are rapidly institutionalized by any human society. The need to justify the inequity creates the shibboleths of prejudice, and the self-sustaining tendency of all institutions maintains both the discriminatory circumstance (e.g. the ghetto) and the prejudicial attitude (e.g. racial supremacy).

**W**Henever such conditions exist, a characteristic mythology develops. Each group evolves secondary attitudes not directly related to the factual inequities. For example, the “master” group attributes to the “slave” group that they are actually better off than they would be otherwise, that they really prefer their subjugated state, that they are in truth not “human” in many ways, that since they live like animals, they *are* animals.

In this article I shall not go into the American Negro superstitions about the white man. But the white mythology still tends to picture the Negro as a jungle creature. Primitive, simple, savage and black, he must have some mysterious magic in him! Since sex is a universal mystery, the Negro is imagined to be sexually extraordinary, and his non-existent “special” qualities (anatomical and functional) come to comprise a menace that is no less threatening because it is a myth.

It is an historic and geographic happenstance that the slaves in America were black. Given the institution of slavery, they might just as easily have been of any other color. However, the mythology of the *black* slave enhanced his continued rejection by the white majority. Black, he was unlikely to become quickly integrated after liberation. As a black man he also aroused the continuing uneasiness—noted by psychologists among most humans and even higher animals—engendered by a fellow creature who is both familiar and strange.

The blackness of the Negro has further worked to his detriment for reasons that have nothing to do with the evolutionary basis of his color. Instead, the reasons relate to man’s diurnal nature. We are dominated by a global rhythm of alternating light and dark, day and night. Humans live by eyesight. Hearing and smelling are less important to us than to those predators who, in the primitive days of mankind, used to hunt us by night. For men, daytime is the

clear time, the white time, the safe and sure and honest time, when by the good light we can see what’s going on and make our livelihood. Night time is the time of danger, of mystery, of evil, and the man of the night is black. The daydream is happy aspiration; the nightmare is consummate terror. In the Middle Ages ignorant European peasants (who had never seen or heard of Negroes) by night practiced the black mass and worshipped a phallic Satan—painted black. Even among the tribes of deepest Africa the word for black in many dialects is the same as the word for evil or danger. And when an American Negro recently visited Nigeria and the Congo, he was astonished to find that he was called “white” by the natives. His skin was as dark as theirs, but he was known to be civilized, educated, *enlightened*. A moment’s thought will reveal a dozen examples of the “goodness” of white (e.g. fair, bright, enlightenment, whitewash, unblemished, pure as the driven snow) and the “badness” of black (e.g. denigrate, blackhearted, blackguard, blackmail, dark motives, blackening of character, blackball, etc.). Heaven is bathed in light; hell is murky (black as the pit); and as long as men survive primarily by their *vision* we can expect these biases to *color* our judgment.

Important as the complex symbolization of black and white may be, however, in the end we find that none of the foregoing suffices to account for the whole of “racial” violence as it has been known throughout history. Men have always identified certain *strangers* as being significantly different from themselves, labeling them as a different race even if they were the same color. Once the difference is defined, all of the familiar myth-engendered taboos and warnings are heard: forbid intermarriage; avoid close contact; suspect the *strangers’* motives; beware of their degraded practices and mysterious treacheries; remember that they are beneath us, they are sexually dangerous, they want to displace us, overcome us, drag us down. Tribes, city-states, nations and entire cultures have always identified particular groups, domestic and foreign, as the *strangers* to be feared and hated. The groups may change with time and treaty, but the old attitudes, feelings and prejudices shift with peculiar ease from the old *strangers* to the new. Man appears

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# where do we learn that taking a life can be condoned?

always to need some "outsiders" that he can identify as a source of great and continuing danger to his country, community, home or way of life. Herein lies a substantial facet of organized human violence.

**T**O UNDERSTAND this tendency and its near-universality, we must examine man as he grows and develops. In almost every society a high degree of frustration is a universal experience in the growing-up of children. It is a peculiarly human attribute that our brains mature much more rapidly than the rest of our bodily parts and functions, so that for many years as children we are helpless and dependent for survival on the adult world. During these years the myriad impulses, wishes and desires of the child are frustrated again and again. Frustration always leads to aggression. But aggression is not tolerated; the child must learn to control it and to repress it. He must identify himself with the adult institutions, activities and individuals who frustrate him but upon whom he still depends.

In childish fantasies or dreams I may wreak my vengeance: a bomb drops on the town and kills everybody except me and perhaps a friend; or a tidal wave swamps the village and everyone else drowns, while I am washed up on a new and lovelier island, uninhabited except for a beautiful maiden. But with age and responsibility come identification with the group, and pride—pride in my own family, city, state, country, race. Destructive feelings toward my own kind are denied and to insure they do not reappear to plague me—they are unconsciously displaced and projected onto the *stranger*.

Thus, it is not *I* who would slay my father, rape the family womenfolk, devastate the community and destroy my own society whose taboos and frustrating restrictions so infuriated me when I was a child. It is not *I*, it is the *stranger*! He is of another race, or of another nation, or of an-

other religion, or of another political persuasion. The important thing is that he is *different* from me, and I must be sure that he remains a *stranger* so that I cannot find out the truth: that he is as much like me as I am like myself. So deep-seated is this inner conflict that it permeates the unconscious mind; in a recent study of thousands of dream narratives (in both Negroes and whites) the *stranger* was found to stalk with great frequency as a threatening, attacking figure.

Most of us, when we fear and hate and would destroy the *stranger*, feel or act in the very sense of righteousness which motivates our struggle against our unacceptable violent impulses. The *stranger* threatens us, so we must destroy him (or segregate him) for the safety of our selves and our *own kind*. Thus we construct defenses to deal with our own unconscious hostile feelings toward our own kind. Secretly we labor to prevent self-betrayal, and so, in our conflict with the *stranger*, we detest most of all the renegade. For those who are moved to hate and fear the Negro (because, by projecting their unacceptable sexual and aggressive feelings onto him, he has become the *stranger*) the white "nigger-lover" who would aid and abet the Negro is a renegade and therefore becomes the object of supreme rejection. It was undoubtedly in fiercely self-righteous opposition to the renegade that on November 22, 1963, a clean-cut young white man walked the streets of Dallas bearing a sign which read: "I Hold John F. Kennedy In Utter Contempt." And let us not deny that there were those among us who cheered the dreadful deeds of that day, even as there were those who applauded the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

Some unfortunate individuals do not develop sufficient organization of character to permit normal repression or control of hostile feelings; we call them unstable or anti-social. In others, the "normal" mistrust and suspicion of the *stranger* becomes

pathologically exaggerated. In still others we find personalities that disorganize under extreme life stress or disease. If such a person is severely frustrated, harboring great stores of hatred for which he has no healthy outlets, and possessing inadequate mechanisms of defense against inner violent feelings, he may become so alienated that the repression and displacement used by others will not serve him. He may finally identify himself with the *stranger*, venting his fury upon his own kind, and finding the necessary justification or sense of righteousness in adopting what he considers to be the *stranger's* ideology.

The original Assassins of the eleventh century were a cult that employed political murder as standard technique. Through the centuries there have been many such assassinations, which are perhaps best characterized as acts of war resembling sabotage. But the pathological murderer, whose choice of a prominent victim causes him to be classified as an assassin today, will usually be found among the mentally abnormal types described above.

The man whose exaggerated hatred of the *stranger* becomes intolerable may be led to murder from ambush, as in the case of the slayer of Medgar Evers. John Wilkes Booth, who shot Abraham Lincoln, was a man whose righteous indignation "justified" his attack on the supposed renegade or betrayer.

There are those whose abnormality (usually not classified by law as insanity) leads them to identify with the standard *stranger* of the time. Leon Czolgosz, who killed President William McKinley in 1901, called himself an "anarchist," as did Joseph Zangara, who killed Mayor Anton Cermak of Chicago during an attack on President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933. Apparently Lee Harvey Oswald, who killed President Kennedy, was of this type; he was a self-styled Marxist, in keeping with a common definition of the *stranger*.

**I**T is important for us to realize that the roots of violence are not unique to these abnormal individuals. The feelings of the assassin may be more intense, his frustrations may be more profound, his character development may be more distorted, his ego may be more warped by the vicissitudes of life than our own. But the capacity for hatred and the impulse toward violence is a part of the personality of every man.

If this be so, how can we help ourselves, and our children, to modify and eventually to control this terrible heritage?

The scientist can suggest many possibilities. Improved social and economic conditions, applied knowledge of desirable child-rearing and educational practices, and and greater self-understanding will surely diminish the violence and crime in our land. But the peculiar situation that defines *strangers* in our midst—whether they be Catholics, Jews, Orientals, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans or Negroes—will only be modified as we modify the institutionalization of inequities perpetuated by ignorance and prejudice. This requires us to put an end to formal discrimination once and for all.

The solution means an end to secret covenants between real-estate agents and mortgage loan companies to perpetuate housing ghettos through "block-busting" tactics which take advantage of the fear of the *stranger* and use it to cheat both those who sell their home in panic and buy their homes in false hope. The wisest move any community can make is to invite minority group families to move into neighborhoods as far from their erstwhile ghettos as possible. Selected and self-selected by socioeconomic and cultural factors, such families will quickly prove to be good neighbors. A good neighbor is no longer a *stranger*. If we open our hearts and our neighborhoods to those who have been so long persecuted, and re-define them as neighbors rather than as *strangers*, the terrors of racial integration will disappear.

The solution means resolving the *de facto* school segregation which unhappily persists. If we freely permit any child to attend any school, anywhere in town, those children who are motivated to make their way to particular facilities will be the best choices to desegregate those facilities. If we appoint and assign teachers freely and at random, according to their ability and skills, some non-white instructors will soon be found in every school, to be *strangers* no more.

The solution also means providing equal job opportunities for equally qualified applicants, whatever their color. With desegregation of neighborhoods and schools, desegregation of employment is the third leg of a stool that can stand firm, and upon which the Negro can climb to a fair place in our society. Given equal opportunity, and redefined as a brunette citizen rather

than as a *stranger*, the Negro will make his way on the basis of his individual qualities, as should every man who lives in a free country.

**T**HE REDEFINITION of the Negro, and his true integration into our society, is one step in modifying the current national climate of violence. Alone, however, it does not solve the problem of violence itself. It leaves us to look elsewhere for a *stranger*, and renders us just as vulnerable to, and capable of, the act of violence. We must go further in our efforts to modify the many traditions that perpetuate violence in our culture. Perhaps, at this season of the year, in the wake of the terrible murders that have ushered in the fateful holidays of 1963, we might concern ourselves with one such practice in particular.

Consider every instance of assassination, high or low, ancient or modern, and you will find that the murderer looked upon himself as an executioner. Right was on his side. His grievance was legitimate. He felt no remorse for his action. His efforts at escape (when made) represented only his evasion of capture by "the enemy."

Where does a self-appointed executioner in our society find precedent for his act of violence? Where has he learned that planned and premeditated murder can be justified? Where did he get the idea that destroying a life can be righteously condoned? Alas, we have taught it to him ourselves, actually demonstrated it by perpetuating the legal anachronism known as capital punishment.

All of the arguments for retaining the death penalty are long since bankrupt. To execute a human being under law does not deter crime, it does not diminish violence, it does not protect society, it does not pay a debt, it does not save money, it does not even represent a very satisfactory revenge—even if vengeance were properly man's rather than the Lord's. Nearly all of the democratic nations of the Western world have discontinued the death penalty, and it is high time that the United States followed suit. Never has a nation that has abolished capital punishment initiated a war.

Nine of our States have eliminated this legal form of murder, and they have not suffered a recrudescence of crime; in fact, they appear to have fewer capital offenses than their neighbors. Such is certainly true

of those nations that have done away with the gallows, the electric chair, the gas chamber, the firing squad. This decrease of violence can be explained partly by the fact that some acts of violence are committed by psychopathically disturbed individuals who wish to be destroyed by society and try to bring the promised destruction upon themselves by first destroying another. But it is also true that only where capital punishment is abolished is the precept clearly established that *no* circumstance is ever considered to justify deliberately taking a human life when saving another life is not the issue.

There are still a few die-hard proponents of the death penalty, and they have a powerful ally: public apathy. Perhaps at this moment in time, however, our apathy may be lifted by the history that has just been written. Perhaps, if we consider the illegal assassinations of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Lee Harvey Oswald, it may occur to us that the legal assassination of Jack Ruby (who slew Oswald) will accomplish precisely nothing. Our execution of a few dozen murderers out of this year's ten thousand will accomplish nothing. Our execution of the Rosenbergs accomplished nothing. Israel's execution of Adolf Eichmann accomplished nothing. Russia's execution of Lavrenti Beria accomplished nothing. Germany's execution of six million Jews accomplished nothing. Nothing. Execution perennially accomplishes nothing, except to perpetuate the horror of the deliberate destruction of Man by Man—always with "justification."

In this grim December of 1963, a month embracing those Jewish and Christian holidays most associated with hope, we might well be reminded of the Judeo-Christian tradition upon which Western society is based, and in which the heritage of this country is rooted. From this magnificent tradition come two great but simple messages (one from the Old Book, and one from the New) that might help us more than all the applications of contemporary science. But they can help us only if we hear them. As a united people, as a truly human race, as men resolved to look upon no man as a stranger, let us listen once again to words of wisdom so profound that for thousands of years men of all faiths have held them to be divine.

"THOU SHALT NOT KILL."  
"LOVE ONE ANOTHER."