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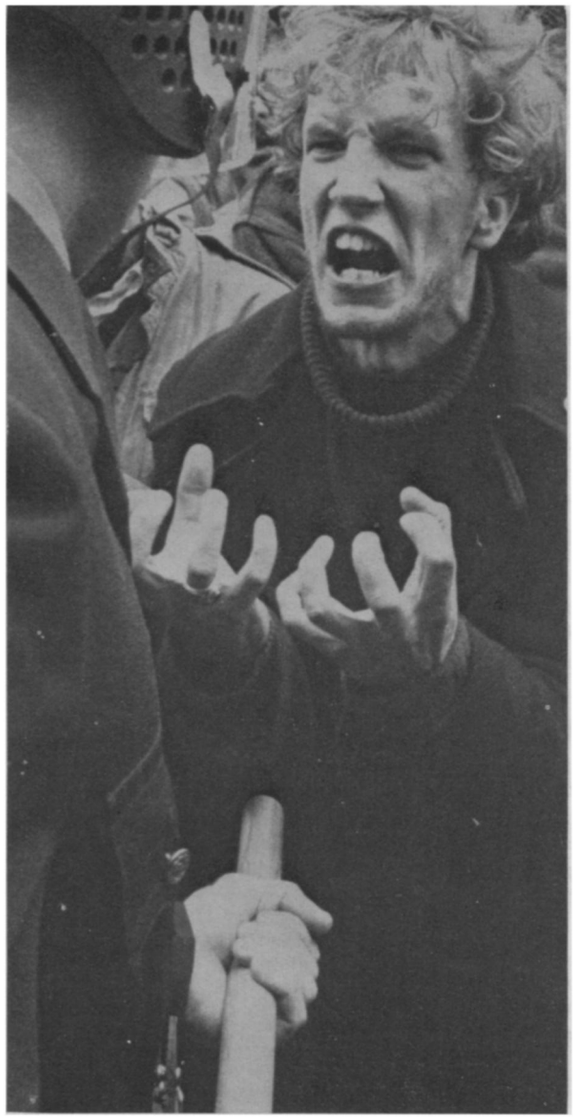
In the wake of assassination: borne of social divisions, violence wracks and shocks the society that spawned it.



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Student draft protest: disaffection moves to the brink of violence.

Riding the shock wave

The Presidential commission appointed after the Kennedy assassination may find violence too complex for social engineering

The United States is not the most peaceful country in history, nor the most violent; but it may now be the most worried.

Cries of a sick society followed Senator Robert F. Kennedy's assassination as they never followed his brother's. The cumulative effect of civil disorder, rising crime rates and a wave of political assassinations seems to have triggered an agonized sense of social breakdown. Psychiatrists are being asked whether TV programming or the Vietnam war can condition a people to violence, or whether Americans have always been violent.

In the wake of the June 5 tragedy, President Johnson has appointed still another study commission to probe the American conscience, though the proposals of two recent, thorough and relevant investigations—the riot commission and the crime commission—have not been implemented.

Again the President has said his commission will call on the social and medical sciences for insight. From them "we hope to learn why we inflict such suffering on ourselves," he says. He wants practical, sensible solutions to control and prevent violence. But are such solutions possible?

The implication is that the solutions offered by the riot and crime panels were neither practical or sensible. If social scientists are in fact called in on this new effort, their view of the American scene is not likely to be any more comforting or their solutions any easier for President Johnson to accept than they were before.

Unlike engineers, social scientists cannot deliver their subject matter—American life—neatly packaged and complete with operating instructions, so that politicians by pulling a wire here, adding a little grease there, can turn violence on and off. A gun control law and a change in television entertainment may have some impact on national behavior, but neither move will reveal the forces that shape American life or quell unrest in the society. Those forces lie on a deeper human level than can be reached with social tinkering.

One cause of misunderstanding is the sweeping diagnosis of a social sickness and the search for a patent medicine to cure it.

"Once we have reached the diagnosis of sickness, the logical treatment is to call upon social doctors (experts or a committee of experts) for a pat prescription or a drug-like equivalent to produce a short order remedy in a few years and with a relatively cheap price-tag," comments Dr. Muzafer Sherif, social psychologist at The Pennsylvania State University well-known for work in group conflict.

Along with the sickness theme goes the idea that violence is catching. The contagion concept of violence is not valid, says the psychologist. It implies that humans are so malleable and thoughtlessly vulnerable that they follow others blindly. On the contrary, people resist the example of violence when there is no underlying turmoil.

One reason they do resist is that group violence is no simple outbreak of animal aggression. Social violence is a very high level affair in humans, says Dr. Ethel Tobach, assistant curator for animal behavior at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. It cannot be put on some unthinking level.

Humans engage in sophisticated intellectual maneuvers before they can be

moved to social violence, she explains. The enemy must be shorn of his humanness. Overriding ideals, such as divine commands, justice or economic welfare, must be found.

Americans of one persuasion or another are currently engaged in the process of justifying group violence on both domestic and foreign fronts— in Vietnam, on campuses and in ghettos. The violence itself is not a disease, but a social pattern common to all human groups.

Why Americans' mental processes should now be leading them to violence is another matter altogether. The riot commission found deep-rooted inequality in American life and spelled out the suppression of blacks in a white society as a root of one kind of violence. The crime commission pinpointed a plethora of ills in the system of criminal justice that act to enhance crime as the root of another. Both panels called for massive amounts of money and major changes in American institutions to cure these ills, but nothing substantial has been done.

What more will the experts say? There are social-political forces shaping American character, but social scientists know very little about them. A few scientists, spurred on by the poverty war and the Negro revolt (SN: 4/20, p. 373) have looked specifically at American character. One or two academic centers—the Lemberg Center for the Study of Violence at Brandeis University and the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, Calif.—deal with U.S. society. But otherwise social scientists have not turned much attention on the quality of American life and on the possible forces that may act to tear down human bonds, amplifying a climate of brutality in the social milieu.

To Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner of Cornell University, an architect of Project Head Start, the agonizing over a sick society stems not only from specific acts of violence, but also from a sense of deeper divisions among people, divisions that stifle expressions of compassion.

"It is not that we are not kind, but there are not enough actions bespeaking that feeling," says Dr. Bronfenbrenner. "Violence is a natural reaction to a world in which people are not being treated as people," he says, concluding that the United States now lacks "explicit training in what it means to treat others with dignity and compassion. . . . In that vacuum, sex of the commercialized variety and violence grow."

Americans, more than other peoples, are segregated by age into peer groups. An individual forms social bonds almost exclusively with others of the same age. This tendency toward age segregation "can be expected to increase alienation, indifference, antagonism and even violence on the part of the younger generation in all segments of American society—including the middle class as well as the disadvantaged," says Dr. Bronfenbrenner. "In fact, there is evidence that crime is both rising and moving into the younger age groups."

In all societies technological advance and urbanization tear down human contact, he adds. But Americans have been particularly susceptible to the process. Lacking a long social tradition, they are easy game for the mobile life accompanied by broken human links and indifference to the problems of others.

Dr. Bronfenbrenner's research indicates that the 1964 Genovese affair—in which a woman was stabbed to death under the eyes of 30 witnesses who chose not to become involved—was not a passing dream on a dark New York street. It has reality in American life.

A three-year study recently completed on 12-year-old children in England, Switzerland, the U.S.S.R. and the United States points up that reality. The children were asked what they would do if they saw one child hurting another. The standard reaction among American children was to do nothing, says Dr. Bronfenbrenner. This was not the case with children of the other three nations.

This and other research, says Dr. Bronfenbrenner, points to a "national need for greater involvement of adults in the lives of children and of children in the problems and tasks of the larger society," and he believes it can be done. "I think we're in desperate trouble," he says, "but I feel reasonably confident that the solution lies in rediscovering and reinforcing the positive."

So far, Americans have experienced nothing so horrible as the Stalinist period in Russia. "But that does not mean we cannot hope to compete in the future. At the moment, we're going toward violence; they're going away from it," he says.

FDA SUCCESSION

Goddard-forged image expected to survive

Since Dr. James L. Goddard resigned as head of the Food and Drug Administration in May, most of the interest in his successor has centered less on exactly who it would be than on whether or not he would be a Goddard man.

A lot of pent-up breath was let out June 6 when Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Wilbur Cohen announced that Dr. Herbert L. Ley Jr. would take over the hottest of government hotspots.

The sighs were accompanied by some looks of resignation and some of relief.

Ley was chairman of the department of microbiology, Harvard School of Public Health, when he was picked by Goddard to direct FDA's Bureau of Medicine in 1966, and was recommended by him for the commissioner's spot. He is likely to continue running the agency in something similar to Goddard's style.

Before the appointment of Dr. Goddard as FDA Commissioner in January 1966 the agency and the industry it was supposed to regulate had had a reasonably happy marriage. George P. Larrick, Dr. Goddard's predecessor, held to the position that his agency would only prosecute a drug company if it had to, that the industry was basically honest anyway, and that FDA's power was limited in most cases.

Goddard, who rarely spoke without frankness, almost immediately declared that the agency had been lax, if not grossly negligent. He cracked down with a bang on laxness within the industry and shook up the organization of FDA to put it on a more hard-line, scientific basis. He gave himself five years to transfigure the agency; he lasted half that long.

Dr. Ley inherits the Goddard mantle.

Most recent of his statements, from what he called the hottest seat in Government, was to the effect that the corner drug store is an obsolete institution whose days are numbered as far as the dispensing of prescription drugs is concerned. This raised a howl, and there are some who believe that this