University Mourns RFK's Assassination

Campus reaction to news of the death of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy Thursday was diverse, predictable and perhaps even symbolic of the trauma everyone said the United States is undergoing. A cross-section of what few persons remain at the University over the summer expressed few new revelations and often attempted to deliberately avoid thinking of the assassination.

The University community—students, workmen, faculty members, proprietors and visitors—represents many phases of economic, social, educational and occupational diversity. In asking for comments concerning the murder of the Presidential hopeful, killed just four and one-half years after his brother John was assassinated in Dallas, Tex., the same post mortem liberalities and sympathies were expressed that, like anti-gun legislation and Secret Service protection, invariably come too late.

Even the professional spokesmen—those whose duties include official University statements of grief and sympathy—were unusually quiet. Even the Rev. Stanley E. Johnson, University Chaplain, was at a loss for words. "I'm shocked into silence by this," he said. "It feels dumb by the event."

The Rev. John A. Hassell, executive director of the Christian Association, expressed wonder and confusion. "I'm just down in the dumps. The same bewilderment that followed (The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther) King is upon us now," he said. He later issued a hurried, personal statement describing how the task now remains for each American to act "to embody the ideas and the life of one who tried to lead us...who showed the suffering; all are required to participate and as the burden becomes ours."

The full text of the statement appears on page four.

University President Gaylord P. Harnwell issued a statement Thursday afternoon. The statement read:

"The entire community of the University of Pennsylvania is shocked and saddened by the death of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy whose great personal abilities won him the respect of our faculty and student body, and whose concern for humanity gained for him the support of persons from all walks of life.

"The University stands for the reasoned resolution of social issues, and we mourn the loss of a national leader who stood for pacific rather than violent action and the conversion of bigotry to brotherhood."

Dr. Benjamin Barber, assistant professor of political science, expressed deep concern over the murder, particularly as the cumulative impact of four other recent assassinations—President John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King.

"The potential reaction of the American people to the violence," Barber said, "hardens the avarices of our democratic free speech, and makes full exposure and unpopular positions mortally costly. It tends to close politics, and to isolate American politicians."

Barber said the assassinations follow a classical pattern described by Erich Fromm in "Escape From Freedom." People become warier and traumatized by the burden of freedom and responsibility and seek a release from their responsibility in favor of security and order, and choose to have their lives organized and directed by authoritarian governmental figures.

A junior in the College said, "I've been avoiding thinking about it; it's almost as if killing people is becoming fashionable. There is nothing you can do. And gun control legislation is not going to stop crazy people from getting weapons."

"There's a certain amount of variability you have to have in a democracy," he continued, "and this variability allows crazy people to walk the streets. The only thing we can do is work towards understanding."

A College for Women senior said the late Senator was "human and wonderful," and that she was affected "ten times more by this death than by any other of the recent assassinations."

A desk clerk at Zavelle's, asked whether Konrad Lorenz' "On Aggression" was kept up front because of the public interest in assassinations, said to his assistant, "Isn't that something about Kennedy hitting the bucket? Kennedy died."

"Yeah, he did," replied the assistant.

"I'll tell you, I'm just living for the present now," added the first clerk. "That's all I know."

John Gallant, proprietor of Gallant Fox records, at 128 S. 36th St., closed his store in mourning. "I'm very upset and about it," he said. "It's the times we're living in. Everybody is meeting too fast. Everybody is geared to want to be President today, and it's too competitive."

"He was only a Senator," Gallant continued. "Christ, give a guy a chance!"

Four girls from Little Flower Catholic High School for Girls, 10th and Lycoming Sts., were asked for their reactions while sipping sodas in Cy's Penn Luncheonette. "I miss him," one said. "He was a good man, as good as his brother." They agreed the late Senator "was better than McCarthy because he knew more about the Vietnam War."

A black man relaxing on a park bench in front of Van Pelt Library said, "I'm surprised. It has to be stopped. There are too many outside people getting into this country."
Although it involves risks, is the law of life."

An attempt to put Robert Kennedy's assassination into perspective leads to terribly disturbing conclusions. There have been five major political assassinations in as many years: Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, and now Robert F. Kennedy.

Has assassination become a commonplace, acceptable political act?

Has this seething country talked itself into believing that crime control bills, gun control laws, riot acts, welfare programs—and blind faith in "what America stands for"—will somehow make the problems and injustices and inequities and psychological deprivations and violent acts in a violent society somehow disappear?

Has our democratic experiment now failed, perhaps because of its great material success?

Has our spirit become so perverted and distorted as to cry that what must be done on the cross of what it is expedient to do?

Robert Kennedy realized that a country must change, that this country must change if it is to be viable. He realized that there are risks involved for those who advocate change. In 1964, Kennedy said:

"To say that the future will be different from the present and past may be hopelessly self-evident. I must observe regretfully, however, that in politics it can be heresy. It can be denounced as radicalism or branded as subversion. There are people in every time and every land who want to stop history in its tracks. They fear the future, mistrust change, and especially that privilege minority of educated men who are the students of America."

"For our legacy—to our children, to the next generation of political leaders in the United States—will be far more than what we leave within our borders. Its most important element will be the role and standing of the United States in the world—whether, in short, people will look to this country with hope or with hate, emulation or envy."
Although it involves risks, is the law of life.

Point out in the United States, of all places, that change, which, in fact, never existed. It hardly seems necessary to stop history in its tracks. They fear the future, mistrust inequities and psychological deprivations and violent acts in a violent society somehow disappear?

Has our democratic experiment failed, perhaps because of its great material success?

Has our spirit become so perverted and distorted as to cruelty what must be done on the cross of what it is expedient to do?

Robert Kennedy realized that a country must change, that this country must change if it is to be viable. He realized too that there are risks involved for those who advocate change. In 1964, Kennedy said:

"To say that the future will be different from the present and past may be hopelessly self-void. I must observe, regrettably, however, that in politics it can be hereby. It can be denounced as radicalism or branded as subversion. There are people in every time and every land who want to see history in its tracks. They fear the future, mistrust the present and foresee the security of a comfortable past which, in fact, never existed. It hardly seems necessary to point out in the United States, of all places, that change, although it involves risks, is the law of life."

As Attorney General, Robert Kennedy was charged with upholding law and order throughout this country. His was the task of applying the laws equally for all.

He was also the task of applying the laws equally for all.

It is ironic that he died by a violent act which deprived him—and his country—of his right to be heard, his right to his own ideas and beliefs before they die. We ourselves must change to master our sickness rather than find cures for the disease itself.

We must drastically shift our priorities if this nation is to survive.

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Robert Kennedy understood the precariousness of life and well understood the haunting closeness of death.
When the Senator campaigned in New York to help Justice Samuel J. Silverman win a primary against the organization for Surrogate's Court, he talked to children on the street.

"How many here have heard of Surrogate's Court? Raise your hands."

A few hands go up.

"How many of you study hard and obey your parents?"

More hands go up. Bobby grins.

"Some in this neighborhood don't tell the truth, I'm afraid."

Laughter.

"Now how many of you are going to go home tonight and tell your mothers and fathers to vote for Judge Silverman?"

All hands go up.

"Silverman, Silverman — you remember that name. Now let's go over it again. What are you going to tell your mothers and fathers when you get home?"

"Vote!" the children answer.

"And vote for whom?"

"Kennedy!" they shout. Bobby puts both hands to his head in mock anguish.

excerpt from "Bobby Kennedy Off Guard"
Edited by Sue G. Hall

"The challenge of politics and public service is to discover what is interfering with justice and dignity for the individual here and now, and then to decide swiftly upon the appropriate remedies."

"Most of our fellow citizens do their best—and do it the modest, unassuming, decent, natural way which is the highest form of public service. But every day in a shameful variety of ways the selfish actions of the small minority sully the honor of our nation. The politicians who take bribes—the businessmen who offer them, the industrialists who rig bids and fix prices—the trade unionists who work with gangsters—the God-fearing American who can't stand the idea of fellow citizens of a different color attending his churches or voting-booths—all have made a series of individual decisions which, one on top of another, degrade the whole character of our society."
The Rev. John A. Russell, Jr., executive director of the Christian Association, issued the following statement Thursday upon hearing the news of the assassination of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy in Los Angeles:

"It is strange that we continued to call him Bobby. He was the father of ten, soon to be 11 children. Confidant of a President whom he served as attorney general, his experience seemed beyond his years and was the basis upon which he was able to clearly see our divisiveness and call for change. Some of us resented his late arrival on the candidates' trail and yet in his presence you sensed an empathy and a hope that we had been searching long to find.

"How do we respond to his death? Is there a national sense of guilt and shame? I think so and yet I feel that we can wallow in that guilt and allow our response to be only sentimental. Is there anger? Of course and the tragedy is that we depict in our response the depth to which we have come to depend upon violence. Is there bewilderment? yes, for he seemed to help in pointing out a much-needed direction and now he is not.

Out of the depths of our puzzlement a multiple response is required. There is the hard work on controlling gun traffic, insufficient in itself but needed as one aspect of a new life style. There is, as at Dr. King's death, the need to decide between violence and non-violence or between anger and love as the way in which we will move into the future. No hero will suffice... all are required to participate and so the burden becomes ours. Bobby, for so he will remain, is now a part of our heritage... in life representing our best... in the act of death representing our worst. It is our decision, each one, as to how we are able to embody the ideas and the life of one who tried to lead us."