



Ars Gratia . . .

The loud silence

by Roger Ebert

The shame is ours. Out of the numbed confusion of the last four days, the sense of that shame is slowly taking hold. We walked in silence in the rain Friday afternoon, each enclosed by the knowledge of death's finality, but now this knowledge is no longer enough to shield us.

Even as the eyes of the nation were turning, in stunned horror, toward the drama which unfolded on a sunlit afternoon in Dallas, all that could happen there had been done. And as the nation looked outward, for once, toward the human grief and the federal tragedy, it should have looked inward as well. Until the assassin's bullet did its swift duty, our eyes had looked elsewhere; our ears had heard, but our minds had not listened. As a nation, we had been busy with other times, other places. As a people, we had been rushing headlong into the chasm of spiritual suicide during years of material wealth undreamed-of during all the span of human history.

For too long, as a nation, we have renounced the truths that made us free. For too long we have bred a cynicism toward a political credo which is all that sets us apart from history. We have laughed: But worse, we have forgotten.

It was with the terrible shock of death that we turned for reassurance to the orderly paths of the federal system. We sought hope in the permanence of institutions, telling each other that we had lost the President, but we still had the Presidency. Yet we are all still within the grip of a passion which, if it told us anything at all, told us:

No institution, no system, no tradition is safe from the dark sickness of the human animal itself. Nothing is safe, nor are any of us safe, from the terror which no ritual can wash from our lives.

This is a lesson we have never learned. The unconscious waste of our days has bred in us a superficiality, a cynicism, an indifference, an emptiness, that the murderer had to penetrate. During the long hours after the spent body of the President was returned to his home, many of us revealed in our actions the true depth of our preoccupation. When the bullet sent its accusation into our hearts, many of us did not know how to act. We had laughed at too many things, in these last decades. We had gained the carelessness which grows from looking at all events in the same way. During the slow procession of hours into the darkness of Friday night, there were still some among us who felt that "life" had to go on. We did not recognize the presence of an awesome event which, in its desolation, had made the "life" of our blindness impossible ever again. We were trapped by the unworthiness of the relationship we maintained with our society.

When one of the libraries was closed on Friday afternoon, there were those who protested that they had books assigned to read. The librarian told them: What difference, what insane difference, could that make — now? Go and be with your family, your friends. Or go and walk alone in the streets, and think. For the first time in your lives, confront the reality of your role as a member of a political community. And grieve.

But there were others. "I voted for Nixon—why should I care?" one blurted. And then he turned in shame, aware of

what he had said, shocked that he could have set it so unthinkingly.

And others. Who felt that a game of football could possibly have meaning at this time. Who, in their preoccupation, so lost sight of the enormity of Friday's event that they felt a series of circumstances was possible which could make a football game anything less than an insult to the grief of the nation.

And others. Who, in their hesitation, in their slowness to confront this crime against the nation, revealed as no words could reveal the extent to which they had lost sight of the basic truths and unsaid beliefs which shoal every foundation the nation really has.

When the assassin's bullet struck, we turned to the now-lifeless body of the President. It was too late for that. This was the time, if ever there was a time, to turn instead to the lifeless body of the Nation. To hear its death-rattle, as it attempted to explain away the enormity of the crime by seeking the pettiness of routine. "Jack would have wanted the game to be played . . . the banks to be open . . . the stores . . . the theaters . . . the restaurants. . ."

Finally, belatedly, there came the some event which, in its desolation, had closings, they were without meaning. Such actions, unless they are taken spontaneously and generously and immediately, have no meaning and are dead.

So, too, was the lack of spiritual dignity in the nation reflected by the grim prying into the faces and the tears of the bereaved. The ceaseless flow of words and images on the television screens of the nation seemed almost able to wash away the fact of death. By the time the black hour arrived, on Sunday morning, for Oswald to be murdered before the view of millions on live television, this blow could have had little meaning.

Confront, in honesty, the sordid characters of the weekend and ask if they are familiar to you. Jack Ruby, pudgy, tinhorn, always wanted to have "class," his friends recalled. Ruby found class by running a strip joint. He found infamy by fouling justice. Lee Oswald, quiet, tortured by hatred, was the inflamed product of a society which, in his crime, reaped a harvest of shame.

Against this backdrop, the strength and dignity of Jacqueline Kennedy takes on a profound value. No grief was the equal of hers. No shock greater. No wound deeper. Yet, from somewhere deep within her essential character, she knew there was a way to act when the President of the United States was murdered. And that is the way she has acted.

If there is to be a flower of hope growing from this disgrace of a nation, perhaps it is to be found in the nobility of Mrs. Kennedy during these past four days. In her person we have seen the same greatness which, seen in the vision and the challenges of the President, we refused to respond to. Perhaps this flower will now take root, and grow once again in the national community.

But there is no room, no possibility, for confidence that this is true. The bitter hatred of the alienated Lee Oswald has found its equal in the garish, neon-lit world of Jack Ruby, with its ugly passion and its perverted search for "class." One saw America as a system of rejection and exploitation; the other saw it as a system of "deals" and "working relationships." Neither saw the America we would want to believe is really here.

On the middle ground of nobility, on the middle land of American principle, on the middle island of greatness, there is a loud stillness and the sound of weeping. Below, the Rubys and the Oswalds and their cousins and their brothers and their children are building a society on the ruins of what should be standing here. And the question is: Will they be fast enough, or will we learn at last? The answer is not easy. Part of it is contained in the murdered body of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.