

*In Only Six Short Years: Genesee County Reacts to the Assassinations of
the Kennedys and Martin Luther KING, JR.*

by

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Introduction

The 1960s was a tumultuous time in the United States. A number of forces converged to produce very visible cracks in what appeared to be, at first glance, a post-World War Two society of shared values. Despite the expanding prosperity of the period, there was, simultaneously, a growing unease concerning income inequality and poverty – be it urban or rural. But for those who remembered the Great Depression and World War Two, it was all too easy to reject the need for reform and experimentation in lieu of an enjoyment of affluence – at least for some – and security. Nonetheless, many of the baby-boom generation who had not experienced the strains of the Great Depression and World War Two were quick to remind America of the gap between the perception of affluence and the reality of poverty. But it should also be remembered that there were other unique developments that compelled many people to acknowledge that life is not always reducible to security, predictability, and a joy rooted in abundance. These developments took place in a six-year period between 1963 and 1968. As one article in *The Daily News* put it in the wake of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November of 1963,

Even for a generation that had known such events as Pearl Harbor, the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt, D-Day, victory days of World War II, and Korea, this (President Kennedy's assassination) was a new and frightening experience.

This same article, entitled “Normalcy Returning To Area after President's Funeral, Many Attend Rites In City” (November 26th, 1963), also included the following:

Something akin to normalcy returned to the

Batavia area today as residents began to emerge from the cloud of unreality of a tragic weekend . . .

That the shock of the events since Friday had not worn off was evident as residents went through the the mechanics of their daily jobs, but with less enthusiasm than usual.

In this and other *Daily News* articles concerning the assassination of President Kennedy we can see the shock resulting from the suddenness of the President's killing. Quite unexpectedly – and especially for those enjoying greater affluence and security – the death of President Kennedy was a reminder that America's good life could very quickly change into something featuring unpredictability and senselessness. Material abundance could not erase the deeper anxieties of modern America. The subsequent assassinations of Senator Robert F. Kennedy in June of 1968, along with that of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. the previous April, also underlined the suddenness with which change could occur – a shift not always amounting to a better future.

Therefore, in this essay, we will explore the enormous impact – and underlying meaning – of the assassinations of three of the period's pivotal American leaders as that played out in Genesee County, New York. As conveyed in innumerable media accounts in Genesee County, these killings pulled people from their assumptions about life in America in a way that flew in the face of material abundance and hope. For example, look at this response to Robert Kennedy's assassination in an issue of *The Daily News* appearing on June 8th, 1968:

Is America "sick?"

That is a phrase that is being bandied about with some abandon in recent years in the wake of violence, assassinations and other demonstrations that actually are not of the American tradition.

To be sure, America is not perfect. But it is sincerely striving to improve –

a factor that undoubtedly generates some of the heat that becomes abrasive and disturbing to some and kindles explosions.

The writer of this editorial then adds that

It is better that there is this effort and attitude rather than complacency and acceptance of (the) status quo which, in the long run, would be far more devastating.

As this 1968 editorial reminds us, it was increasingly difficult to ignore the fractures evident in American society. But the quality of suddenness in all three assassinations made the routine of daily life seem more precarious than ever. In all three cases – both nationally and in Genesee County – other consequences were also produced. The capacity of the modern media was evident and commented on repeatedly. Modern media quickly articulated the news, making these assassinations national and international events almost instantaneously. Largely because of the sophistication of communication, what became a common experience produced a virtual standstill in daily activities – or even violent reactions in the case of Dr. King. In any event, the normal activities of daily life were temporarily halted.

Be it the Kennedys or King, their personal qualities of a pronounced youthful energy could not be separated from the sudden appearance of death. Their deaths at relatively young ages, combined with the energy displayed in their public images, reminded many of their own mortality which no amount of success and material affluence could overcome. As *The Daily News* reminded its readers following the death of Dr. King, Dr. King's vitality translated into his being

. . . a man of courage and depth who stood for what he believed (in) at the risk of personal humiliation and worse.

The deaths of such national figures also brought into focus another aspect of Cold War life – the pervasive and yet unspoken fear of cataclysm – especially that of nuclear war. The sudden death of these leaders condensed the ever present

possibility of mass death to more comprehensible human proportions. The Kennedys and King embodied what could happen to any of us – sudden death. We, like they, are indeed vulnerable. This perspective put much of American life into a new light – a theme played out in the County’s reaction to all three assassinations.

Therefore, in this admittedly short essay, we will explore the four themes discernible in Genesee County’s reaction to these assassinations. Each of these motifs are discoverable in the public’s perception of all three events – the crucial role played by modern communications; the forging of a common experience uniting people from different walks of life to bring their lives to a momentary halt; the image of all three men as possessing a youthful energy standing in stark contrast to sudden and violent death; and the palpable fear of mass death in a nuclear age that become reducible to understandable human proportions upon the death of all three leaders.

Also evident – though this aspect of the public’s reaction will not be explored in this writing – is a sense that the lives of such leaders simply could not have been so abruptly ended through the actions of a lone gunman – be it Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan sirhan, or James Earl Ray. A group with something to gain as a result of these deaths must have planned, and coordinated, each killing. The important point here is perception rather than factual accuracy. The view that slowly but surely took hold in Genesee County – as it had throughout the United States – was that these crimes were so heinous that they simply could not have resulted from the actions of lone gunmen. There is deeply embedded in American culture – for reasons that take us beyond the scope of this essay – that clings to the idea that there are sinister developments in highly dramatic moments such as these that are in evidence at lofty levels of power.

This combines with the assumption – on some equally deep cultural and psychological level – that leaders – especially those with a high purpose – could not have had their lives ended by anything other than a highly-organized, highly complex conspiracy. It is simply not satisfying for many people to embrace the idea that a lone gunman acted out of mental illness – or even ideological fervor. Instead, it is more comforting to conclude that murderers were trying to stop the plans of a great leader. We want to believe that a leader died as the victim of a cause – rather than at the hands of an unbalanced assassin. As the following excerpt from *The Daily News* reminds us, the Warren Commission’s efforts were, for many, to no avail. Keep in mind that this assessment of the assassination of President Kennedy, released to the public on September 27th, 1964, totaled

twenty-six volumes. In addition to these, there are hundreds of thousands of pages of documents and investigative reports. This report contains 8,082 pages of testimony. Commission members took affidavits, testimonies, or statements from 552 witnesses – this was more than ten times the number of witnesses appearing before the joint Congressional committee that investigated the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Federal Bureau of Investigation conducted 25,000 interviews as the investigatory arm of the Warren Commission, while a total of 3,154 pieces of evidence were introduced before this Commission. Nonetheless, *The Daily News* expressed the doubts of many regarding the *Warren Commission's Report* in 1964 – a view already widely circulating among the county populace. The editorial shown below chided the Report, despite its “20 volumes of testimony, interviews and evidence” in an editorial of September 30th, 1964, entitled “Why? Is Still Unanswered Question:”

The great unanswered question in the report of the Warren Commission – which had just concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald killed President John F. Kennedy – is why he did it.

The seven-man commission, headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren, after almost 10 months of investigation and with the help of all the resources of government, admits it couldn't learn Oswald's reason for the assassination.

Unable to address even motive, this editorial explains, means the obvious – that many other questions remained unanswered. One of these questions is whether Oswald acted alone. With all of this in mind, then, we shall turn first to the murder of President Kennedy and the reaction it produced in Genesee County.

The Assassination of President Kennedy

As is well known, President Kennedy was shot and killed in Dallas on November 22nd, 1963. Ironically, the same media that had played such a role in his rise to the White House now captured – and rapidly spread – news of his death. It also conveyed the images of his funeral and – to add to the shock of his sudden death on that Friday in November – the live television broadcast of the shooting of his

alleged assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, in the basement of the Dallas Police Department by Jack Ruby.

There is little doubt that television coverage in particular deepened the effect of the assassination on the public in ways that were unprecedented. To sit before the television screen for several days in a row was to absorb images that had not before been seen. The horrors of the events were contrasted with images of a young President and his even younger wife – and small children – that punctuated more somber images. For instance, shots of Mrs. Kennedy at public events in happier times were then alternated with the image of her in bloodstained clothes.

Such horrific depictions, combined with those of normal days, produced a common experience that translated into a virtual halt of everyday life in the days following November 22nd. This was as true in Genesee County as it was in the nation at large. Only one day after the assassination, the November 23rd, 1963 front page of *The Daily News* had as one of its headlines “Shock and Disbelief Mark News of the Assassination as Batavians Learn of Death.” Several pages into that same issue, stressing just how fast the news spread, we see an article entitled “Shock Wave of President Kennedy’s Death Engulfs High and Low Throughout (the) World.” Readers were informed that the “tragic flash from Dallas reverberated around the world like a clap of thunder: the young vigorous President of the United States was dead . . . and everywhere the great and the lowly mourned John F. Kennedy’s passing.”

Not surprisingly, the grief felt around the world “was clearly evident in Genesee County as well.” The news spread swiftly through the city. Within the hour, “we are told; everyone on Main St. knew what had happened.” This same November 23rd article quoted person after person who articulated the similar feelings of shock – a shared experience both within and beyond Genesee County, exacerbated by the role played by a media capable of disseminating news very quickly. For example, one woman, identified only as “Mrs. Kelso,” was “in the C.L. Carr Store when she heard the news.” She said that

It was a terrible shock. I had just read about the President and his son in *Look* magazine. He called his son, John, John. This doesn’t seem possible.

Harold A. Craig, the mayor of Alexander, “found it difficult to control his emotions.” He told *The Daily News* that “I am terribly shocked.” A patrolman, who

walked a beat on Batavia's Main Street, Lawrence Falkowski, exclaimed that the news was "hard to believe." These and other reactions appearing in *The Daily News* on November 23rd, 1963, were summarized as follows:

This was the reaction on Main St. Within the hour of the news of the assassination of the President people found it difficult to believe (that) such a thing could happen in America . . .

But it had, and it produced a virtual standstill in ordinary life. Readers were told that the New York Stock Exchange would remain closed on Monday, November 25th, just as Batavia High School rescheduled "for a later date" its senior play. Stores in Batavia scheduled closings until 2 p.m. on that Monday, while schools were scheduled to be closed on the day of the President's funeral – November 25th. Normal television programming was cancelled until Tuesday, November 26th so that networks could focus exclusively on the assassination and related events. It was not until that Tuesday (November 26th) that *The Daily News* could feature a front page article capturing this shift:

Normalcy Returning To Area After President's
Funeral, Many Attend Rites In City

Tragic Weekend Comes To Close, Business
Resumes

Yet, despite the depiction of relative normalcy, the stark contrast between a youthful President Kennedy and the suddenness of his death abounded. For instance, on the very last page of *The Daily News* only a day before, the Ryan-DeWitt Corporation sponsored a full page statement. Half of this page showed a photograph of a young and purposeful President Kennedy followed by what is shown below:

In Memory of Our Beloved President John
Fitzgerald Kennedy

"A Profile in Courage"
(A reference to the book published only a few

years earlier by then Senator Kennedy)

Over the next several days the images of youthful energy stood in stark contrast to the funeral of President Kennedy. Indeed, this contrast extended to his widow. On November 26th *The Daily News* featured a front-page article entitled “At Midnight, Mrs. Kennedy Goes to Husband’s Grave with a Sprig of Flowers.” Reminding readers that Jacqueline Kennedy was “a widow at 34,” those same readers were also prodded to remember how even someone as prominent as the President’s widow could have the security of her position suddenly, and senselessly, swept away:

Among the foremost questions are how long will she remain at the White House, where will she make her new home and what will become of the White House school she set up for daughter Caroline and some 20 other children.

Why was this contrast between youthful life and death particularly poignant in 1963, reaching a frenzied level with the Kennedy assassination? The short answer is found in what can be called a death anxiety in American life. I do not believe that it is a coincidence that a widely read book entitled *The American Way of Death* appeared in that same year. Jessica Mitford’s work stressed that there was a wide array of tactics employed by Americans as a way of avoiding the reality that life is finite. She asserted that funeral directors worked hard to design methods that facilitated covering up bodily disintegration and gruesome wounds. But President Kennedy’s wounds were too extensive to be covered up. He was simply, and irrevocably, dead, and his casket remained closed.

His literal annihilation went straight to the heart of this death anxiety that was rooted in a nuclear age. President Kennedy himself had conceded in one speech that “a simple clash could escalate overnight into a holocaust of mushroom clouds.” Simply put, there was a pervasive fear in American life that nuclear war – purposeful or accidental – could produce sudden mass death. His death, resulting in the mutilation and death of a young person, was therefore a demise that was all too comprehensible in ways that the mass death of countless millions could not be.

This death anxiety was articulated in the mass media. Along with newspapers, there were many examples of this in television shows and in movies. During the

1964 presidential election *The Daily News* proved to be no exception. Following on the heels of concern about a transition of power in the wake of President Kennedy's assassination, and the implications of this in a nuclear age, *The Daily News* editorialized on November 27th that "as our power has grown, so as our peril." On December 6th, in an article entitled "Assassination Problems Different Now," the potential for a mistake – or simple confusion – surrounded the decision to launch a nuclear war:

There were no intercontinental ballistic missiles in Lincoln's day (following his assassination). At that time the nation could not be in immediate danger if someone were not found within a matter of minutes to become president and commander-in-chief.

The editorial then added this:

Now a few moments – the time between the start of an enemy nuclear attack and the order to make a nuclear counter-attack – could mean the difference between annihilation and some survival if not victory.

This editorial, emphasizing the real possibility of mass death, then concluded that

Such a foe might think in terms of assassination, not of the president alone, but (of) those in the immediate line of succession: the vice president and the two congressional leaders.

It isn't hard to imagine the dismay and confusion after four such assassinations if they all occurred within a few minutes. The telephone lines would be a mess. And how could anyone be sure who was dead and who was alive?

So adding to the fear about mass death was the equally disturbing factor of chaos and how that could precipitate a nuclear exchange. In any event, the fear of mass death was only exacerbated – and made more visible – when President Kennedy unexpectedly died, symbolizing the death of countless others. This brings us back to *The Daily News* coverage of the 1964 presidential election. Woven throughout that coverage was the same apprehension concerning mass death that had emerged less than a year before as a consequence of President Kennedy’s assassination. Hence the fear only intensified when communist China achieved nuclear capability. Only a few weeks before the 1964 election, we find a front page article in *The Daily News* entitled “China’s Bomb Widens U.S. Defense Role” on October 17th, 1964:

A world coexisting uneasily between two
nuclear power blocs is now confronted
with three.

If anything, the fear of mass death via the deployment of nuclear weapons only intensified when communist China joined the “nuclear club.” The anxiety concerning mass death, maybe even more incomprehensible now, only brought into sharp relief the unexpected and senseless death of one person – President Kennedy. Ironically, the sudden death of yet another Kennedy – Robert – only replicated the public’s reaction of 1963, albeit in some different – yet familiar terms – in 1968.

The Assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy

Not long after midnight on June 5th, 1968, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, brother of the late president, a former Attorney General and member of the U.S. Senate between 1964 and 1968, was shot after giving a victory speech in Los Angeles, California. He had emerged victorious in the California Democratic primary election. Taken to Good Samaritan Hospital after suffering the attack at the Ambassador Hotel, he died from his wounds about twenty-six hours later. His body was subsequently flown to New York City. After a public viewing of a closed casket for two days, he was buried, like President Kennedy, in Arlington National Cemetery.

The public’s perception of his death bore a striking similarity to that of his brother’s. The role played by the media; the sense of a common experience

producing a momentary halt in daily life; the image of youthful purpose contrasted with that of death; and a death anxiety anchored in the fear over mass annihilation all were apparent in the reactions to Senator Kennedy's assassination. These developments all reared their heads in June of 1968. While all of this was seen nationally, our concern here, of course, is that of Genesee County. Accordingly, let us turn initially to the role played by the media in Genesee County in the wake of Senator Kennedy's murder and the related events it gave birth to.

For a week after the assassination the three major networks – NBC, ABC, and CBS – devoted a total of 140 hours to the assassination and related events, e.g. Senator Kennedy's funeral, while, simultaneously, eschewing commercials and regular programming. Such a focus was evident in Genesee County as well, as such newspapers as *The Daily News* devoted much of their space to the coverage of the Los Angeles event. Virtually the entire front page of the June 5th issue focused on Robert Kennedy's shooting – a full day before his actual death. Between the different types of media, print and otherwise, we witness once again the creation of a shared experience, as we had with the reaction to President Kennedy's death. But maybe the sense of a shared experience prompted by such extensive media coverage was even more intense in the reaction to Senator Kennedy's murder. Once again, the media covered the somber quality of Robert Kennedy's funeral while interjecting images of a young and purposeful Senator Kennedy. In effect, the public was reliving the assassination and burial of President Kennedy via the sudden death of his younger brother. In that June 5th issue of *The Daily News* we therefore see this:

Whole Country Sick

Wounding of RFK Shocks Area Residents

"It seemed like a recounting of the assassination of President Kennedy . . ." "I cried . . . I couldn't believe it" "The whole country must be sick!"

These were a few of the reactions of people on Main St. today as they talked of the wounding of US Sen. Robert F. Kennedy in California. Some said it signaled the need for an assessment of

moral values by the people of the United States.

The article continued:

Clerks and downtown employees either had transistor radios tuned to reports, or would ask customers about the latest news.

In stores handling television sets, all were on and many people were stopping periodically to check the reports and listening closely to programs.

Keep in mind that what I am only touching upon here, in terms of the county's reaction to the Kennedy shooting, and the shared experience of this event, is *before* reports of his actual death a day later. As one would expect, the front page of the June 6th issue was almost exclusively concerned with Senator Kennedy's death. "County Area Shares Grief In Tragedy," one article exclaimed. It then goes on:

Genesee County joined the state and the nation today in paying tribute to the memory of Senator Robert F. Kennedy, who succumbed this morning after being fatally wounded by an assassin in Los Angeles.

We then see this:

The Kennedy Headquarters at Jackson and School Sts. . . . was also closed. Francis M. Repicci, who had been heading the Kennedy effort in this area, was shaken by the Senator's death.

Mr. Repicci then added that "we have gone through this before, in 1963 . . ."

As we have seen in the reaction to President Kennedy's assassination, this shared experience induced a virtual halt to daily activities. One of Senator Kennedy's rivals for the Democratic nomination, Senator Eugene McCarthy,

reported a suspension of campaigning for an indefinite period. In a June 6th article in *The Daily News*, we are told that

Former LeRoy Supervisor Robert G. Fussell, who had been heading the McCarthy efforts in the County, said that he has been advised of the decision by the Senator's national headquarters to suspend all campaign efforts indefinitely out of respect to the memory of Sen. Kennedy.

Along with such halts in daily life as a temporary suspension of the McCarthy campaign, the same shock over such an unexpected death that was seen only five years earlier was also described with regard to Senator Kennedy's assassination. A long article in the June 5th issue of *The Daily News* captured this sense of shock and outrage regarding the assassination. For instance,

Genesee County Judge Glenn R. Morton termed it a "stupid and senseless" act and said it was an indication of the "tenor of our times."

This same article then quoted

Chief of Police Stanley N. Smith (who) is also concerned over the overtones of lawlessness. . . . First we had John F. Kennedy, then Martin Luther King and now, Sen. Kennedy. If we continue to tolerate (these) problems, the rioting at colleges and universities, we can look forward to more attacks and assaults on public officials.

Finally, the police captain of LeRoy, Salvatore A. Falcone, referred to the "awful tragedy." He continued by saying that it "should awaken people to the fact that something must be done in the control of guns."

Sentiments such as these produced, once again, a vivid contrast between the image of youthful energy and purpose alongside the reality of sudden death. In addition to the emotions produced by the second- and violent – murder of a Kennedy in the span of only a few years, there was the perception among many

that some of Robert Kennedy's youthfulness was found in the way he always seemed to be growing. In the 1950s, even before he became Attorney General and his brother became President, he had a reputation for ruthlessness that was applied equally to suspected communists and to labor leaders such as Jimmy Hoffa. In fact, it was an open secret even after becoming Attorney General that he had little interest in civil liberties, for he did such things as allow the Federal Bureau of Investigation to tap Martin Luther King's telephone.

But after his brother's death – coupled with the deepening quagmire of Vietnam and worsening race relations in the United States – he showed a propensity for growth, a hallmark of a younger person changing as a consequence of seeing the world differently over time. He did not display rigidity, and it was this acceptance of change that allowed many to see him as young. The fact that he was only forty-two when he died only drove home the reality of his relative youth.

The perception that he was still growing – that he was young – stood in stark opposition to his unexpected death. The seriousness with which he approached the electorate, combined with a discernible open-mindedness, was one captured in a June 5th article in *The Daily News*. This article read, in part, that Robert Kennedy

. . . was, on the stump, intensive, hard-hitting and frequently very funny, especially in a self-deprecating way that might tend to undermine his alleged ruthlessness.

A youthful Robert Kennedy's death embodied – even for many of his political opponents – a loss of hope for a renewal of America torn apart by racial conflict, political division, war, and recurring assassinations. It was of course this same lack of hope for a predictable future that went to the heart of the death anxiety born of the nuclear age. How can one look optimistically to the future when at any moment millions could suddenly, and violently, meet their end under a mushroom cloud? As we saw in the assassination of President Kennedy, the senseless death of millions could not be easily comprehended. But reducing that vulnerability to one person could be. Even Robert Kennedy understood this not as morbidity but, instead, as realism. *The Daily News* captured this side of Senator Kennedy's outlook in that June 5th issue:

Invariably, he (Robert Kennedy) would bounce down the steps of his campaign plane and, with little protection, plunge into frenzied, screaming crowds seeking to grab and tug at him. And inevitably we thought of Dallas and thought that this Kennedy was moving among strangers with much less protection than his brother did on that dark November day in 1963.

Moving into crowds with little protection was something Robert Kennedy did, the article added, “with a certain sense of fatalism.” Finally, this same article tells us that in the midst of

the lulls in the campaign, at the end of a long day . . . we (reporters) often noticed as he rested and finally was alone, a look of infinite sadness, of terrible hurt . . .

The article then offered this:

Most reporters noticed this and among those who knew him well, newsmen and staff aids, there was common agreement that that look wasn't there before November 22, 1963.

Senator Kennedy persisted in his quest to offer solutions to the problems confronting America in 1968 despite the looming presence of a nuclear holocaust. Like so many other Americans who knew that at any moment life could be drastically altered, he worked within a context of mass death that sobered his otherwise optimistic outlook for the future. He once remarked that he could not “be sitting around here calculating whether something I do is going to hurt my political situation in 1972 . . . who knows whether I'm going to be alive in 1972?” It was known that his favorite poem was “I Have a Rendezvous with Death,” by Alan Seeger. In that poem, a poet goes off to war thinking that it was worth the effort but expecting to die nevertheless. Ironically, this was eventually the perspective of Martin Luther King, Jr. by the end of his life.

The Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In that fateful year of 1968 there was yet a third assassination that people in Genesee County responded to. This took place a little more than two months prior to that of Senator Kennedy. This was of course the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the fourth of April. He too was shot – in this case as he stood on the balcony of his motel in Memphis, Tennessee. He was in Memphis to assist with the strike of sanitation workers, a part of a “Poor People’s Campaign” designed, as he put it, to “dramatize the plight of America’s poor of all races and make very clear that they are sick and tired of waiting for a better life.” Ironically, in the midst of his campaign for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party in Indianapolis only two months before his own death, Senator Kennedy was informed of Dr. King’s assassination. Despite warnings that the African-American audience he was about to speak to could be furious, and without extensive bodyguard protection, Senator Kennedy nonetheless echoed the vision of Dr. King at a time of all too often violent reactions to Dr. King’s assassination:

For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond these rather difficult times.

This speech was widely credited with preserving the peace in Indianapolis in the wake of Dr. King’s death. Nonetheless, illustrating the role played by a media capable of disseminating news rapidly and serving to create a common experience within a short time, *The Daily News* reported on April 5th that civil disturbances had erupted in numerous cities when word of Dr. King’s killing became known. New York City; Tallahassee, Florida; Ita Benna, Mississippi; Boston; Jackson, Mississippi; Raleigh, North Carolina; and Detroit were some of the areas listed by *The Daily News* as being rocked by violent reactions. In the following days this same newspaper outlined additional civil disturbances, all of which constituted a key element in a shared experience largely fashioned by the media: “Racial Violence Leaves 16 Dead; Dawn Brings Calm,” proclaimed one

front page headline. Another, immediately below, exclaimed that “Chicago Wracked by Night-Long Siege of Terror.”

Such reactions to the assassination of Dr. King were stressed in the media accounts concerning his killing. Despite President Lyndon Johnson’s call for calm, serving to remind Genesee County and the country at large of Dr. King’s advocacy of nonviolent solutions to America’s ills, about one hundred cities and towns had endured looting and/or arson. 34,000 National Guardsmen, and 21,000 federal troops, had been called upon to restore order – becoming what was the largest military deployment in modern times for a civil emergency. Accordingly, *The Daily News*, in an April 6th editorial entitled “Long, Long Time,” commented that it “will be a long, long time before the nation recovers from the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.” This editorial emphasized the shock accompanying Dr. King’s unexpected death:

His slaying in Memphis, Tenn., had a shocking, (and) staggering impact on the nation. It reverberated disbelief and disgust everywhere that such a thing could happen.

As in the other two assassinations, the common experience of shock, accelerated by media reports, translated into a virtual halt in daily activities. On April 8th *The Daily News* reported that area schools would largely resume the following day – Tuesday, April 9th. But even then, “special services and tributes will be paid in the schools in memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the day of his funeral.” An article entitled “Nation Respectful in Tribute to Dr. King” in the April 9th issue of *The Daily News* spoke of numerous halts in daily activities – such as a bank holiday in New York. In this same issue – indeed, on the same front page – an article echoing Dr. King’s “Poor People’s Campaign” appeared. Entitled “Low-Income Housing Termed Moral Duty By City Businessman,” readers were informed that the “City of Batavia and its City Council have a ‘moral responsibility’ to move quickly in getting public housing approved, the manager of a city concern said Monday night.”

The advocacy of such programs as the above in Batavia illustrate the influence of Dr. King – justifying as well the publication of an editorial cartoon found in *The Daily News* on April 9th. Showing Dr. King and Mahatma Gandhi talking, the caption underneath read “the odd thing about assassins, Dr. King, is that they think they’ve killed you.” While a legacy of trying to enact Dr. King’s beliefs is

certainly part of a common experience, so too is a more sinister halt to daily routine – that of the civil unrest that I have already alluded to. As late as five days after Dr. King’s assassination, *The Daily News* ran a front page story entitled “On the Racial Scene,” in which civil disturbances resulting from Dr. King’s death were reported in Baltimore; Cincinnati; Wilmington, Delaware; Youngstown, Ohio; Pittsburgh; and Washington, D.C. Even shopping for Easter underwent a pronounced halt, as *The Daily News* reported on April 10th. Underneath “Riots disrupt Easter in Some Sectors,” readers were told that

Another curious effect results from civil disorder. Several surveys have shown that consumers – even though not immediately endangered – turn cautious, postpone sales and take a wait –and-see attitude when trouble abounds.

While a common experience accelerated by modern mass media took some *unique* forms in the wake of Dr. King’s death, another aspect of the country’s reaction to Dr. King’s assassination did not. Here, as in the other two killings, the imagery of youthful energy and purpose stood in clear opposition to sudden and senseless death.

This image of purpose and idealism translated into Dr. King’s commitment toward those without political power or economic privilege – regardless of race. An unwillingness to accept the status quo is a hallmark of youthful thinking – regardless of actual age. The fact that he was only thirty-nine when he died only served to accentuate this image of youthful purpose. The perception of Dr. King as a young person filled with a passionate belief that the world could be changed for the better emerged at a moment in time when many of the baby boom generation thought in similar terms. As a result, their youth and idealism became, for many, inextricably bound to Dr. King’s. His stand against the Vietnam War only intensified this synthesis between young people and Dr. King. As he stated in one speech:

I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality . . . I believe that unarmed truth

and unconditional love will have the final word.

It was such sentiments that were captured in *The Daily News* depictions of Dr. King. On April 5th, in an editorial entitled “Even if they kill us, we still have power,” the point was made that Dr. King’s belief in the capacity of people to change the world for the better was one that was not only possible – but indeed, attainable, through nonviolence:

In Albany, Ga., in 1962, when Negro crowds hurled bottles and bricks at policemen, King suspended his marches and called a day of penance, going through the poolrooms collecting knives and other weapons.

We cannot win this struggle with bottles and bricks,” he (Dr. King) said.”

To be sure, not all agreed with Dr. King’s endorsement of nonviolence as a means for addressing America’s ills – especially those of race. But despite the growing fragmentation of the civil rights movement – especially the dissent of Malcolm X and his followers – it remains safe to say that many who had sympathy for Dr. King’s movement held an optimistic belief that change was possible, it could be conducted without violence and hatred, and it could operate within the broad structure of American institutions despite their flaws. What was needed was a rejuvenation of basic American beliefs that were there from the beginning and which had sadly been lost over time.

But Dr. King’s sudden and violent death weakened that optimism for many Americans. It stood in stark contrast to the youthful idealism that characterized Dr. King’s outlook. It made even moderates despair over what seemed to be a decade of assassinations in which some of the most promising young leaders in America were simply being murdered. Coupled with a sense that many of America’s finest young people were being senselessly killed in a war without fronts or clear objectives, it drove home the vulnerability, once again, of the individual in a world teetering on the edge of nuclear annihilation. When Senator Kennedy, a year before his death, took to the Senate floor to state his opposition to the Johnson administration’s bombing in Vietnam, and concluded that “we are

all participants . . .we must also feel as men the anguish of what it is we are doing,” he was echoing the concern of Dr. King with respect to the direction that America was going. *The Daily News* clearly articulated its concern along these same lines – that all of us, as illustrated by the main thrusts of the period between 1963 and 1968 – assassinations, violence in America’s streets, and a war without clear objectives consuming America’s youth – were vulnerable and whose lives could end suddenly and senselessly. Look, for instance, at “Air Force, Civilian Views Differ on Bomb Defenses” as it appeared in a front page headline story on April 25th, 1968:

Air Force and civilian analysts differ sharply in a Pentagon intelligence dispute already casting a shadow over U.S. plans to defend against Soviet bombers of the 1970s.

The article, emphasizing the real possibility of nuclear war, goes on:

Basically at issue is the soundness of a national-level assessment that the Soviets will not develop a supersonic strategic bomber with far-reaching missiles during the next six years.

Gen. John P. McConnell, Air Force Chief of Staff, thinks they will and argues (that) the United States should build some new 2,000 miles-per-hour interceptors able to shoot them down.

In conclusion,

The four-star general said he felt (that) the Soviets would indeed put into operation a new supersonic bomber capable of “delivering an extremely long-range, high speed air-to-ground missile” against the United States by 1976.

Even at the height of a shooting war in Vietnam, with the pages of *The Daily News* replete with county youth entering military service, serving in Vietnam, or being wounded or killed there, there was attention paid to the larger picture – and anxiety over – nuclear war. While in some ways nuclear war remained a politically taboo subject, the pronounced fears it unleashed would not go away. While military and scientific personnel by 1968 were generally seen as helping the country defend itself against other nations, and especially the U.S.S.R., the consequence of mass death was one that still reared its head time and again. Here we see the public's ambiguity about the nuclear establishment. It was seen as necessary and yet was deeply distrusted. Part of that distrust was the reality of personal vulnerability – an exposure to sudden death that was dramatically played out, once again, in the unexpected and violent death of Dr. King.

Conclusion

All three assassinations generated a wide array of emotional responses which included those discernible in Genesee County. In the interest of brevity I relied upon a widely circulated newspaper in Genesee County between 1963 and 1968 – *The Daily News*. A newspaper such as this both expresses – and helps to shape – public opinion. Nonetheless, as that same newspaper depends upon its readership for revenue, it can never get too far ahead of the public. Hence it is an indication of how many people feel about the issues of the day – in this case, three pivotal assassinations in the 1960s.

Modern mass media – including the newspaper – stressed the reactions that the public had to these murders. In the process, in the descriptions of reactions to these events, and in the narratives about the events themselves, a perception of a common experience was created. Individuals identified with the emotional reactions of others both in and out of Genesee County. They found that many others were shocked by what had happened. They also learned that in neighboring communities that shock translated into a virtual halt in normal, daily activities.

As I have tried to emphasize, part of one's shock was rooted in the sudden, violent death of leaders perceived as young – both chronologically and in terms of their purpose and idealism. The view that they were young – and struck down in the prime of life – only served to contrast their active, meaningful lives with the totality, and finality, of death. Such an understanding only worked to heighten a death anxiety already quite pronounced in American life after the explosion of the

first atomic bombs in 1945. Many, on a deep and unexamined level, already felt vulnerable, despite the seeming assurances of prosperity, predictability, and hope for the future visible in American society. For if the safety of prominent leaders remained uncertain, how could ordinary people feel certain? American life certainly went on, but it advanced with a tentative quality not giving in to what would otherwise be an unfettered American optimism. The question that remains is this: can there be an unlimited American optimism in the wake of these assassinations and the specter of a nuclear exchange? Only time and new circumstances will allow us to answer that question.

