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America the Ugly: Where Hate and Fear Create Vision of Hell

By JOE MCGINNIS

LOS ANGELES, June 5.

It is hard to think of what he writes while you are coming down here in the airplane because of an event which has proved that you do not live in a country anymore, but in a republic. It does not happen anywhere the way it happened here. Not in Russia, not in China, not in North Vietnam.

Nowhere anymore does a man have to feel when he stands up to try to lead for people that he runs at least as much risk of being shot in the leg by a private person as a man in uniform. We have to be shot by a bullet from someone who does not like the things he says.

Nowhere but in America.

This country does not work anymore. Maybe it stopped the day John Kennedy was killed, and only we did not know it at the time.

Now, less than five years later, with the man who killed Kennedy murdered, with Martin Luther King gone to a gunman’s gun, and with Robert Kennedy now lying in a bed in a hospital in Los Angeles with a hole in the middle of his head from where a bullet had passed through his brain, now we have to know it. Now we cannot hide from it anymore. This is not a country.

The richest, most powerful place in the world and at the same time the money and power have produced has been a bunch of people so filled with fear and hate and ugliness that when a man tries to tell them they must do more for others, instead of listening to him they shoot him in the head.

This is not a country anymore. This is a vision of hell.

YOU can go out on a plane into the heart of the horror and the only thing to do is to write about the man. I do not know Robert Kennedy very well but I know him better than I know the other men who are trying to be President, and I know him well enough to like him.

The hatred people have for him is something I could never understand.

I have heard tell of the stories, all of the things that are supposed to prove that this man is mean and small and without ethics, but all I know for sure about him as a professional man is that he cares about the people in America who do not have a chance and all I know about him personally is that he loves children and the outdoors and he has a great ironic way of laughing at people and things including himself, and that when he tells you something he means it.

The first time I met him was last November, in Washington, just before I went to Vietnam. I had been told that he had some inward thoughts on Vietnam that might be helpful to me in appraising the place and while he did not want to express them publicly because they were different from the thoughts Lyndon Johnson had at the time, he would be glad to discuss them in private.

I saw him in his office in the new Senate Office Building at 2:30 on a terribly bright fall afternoon. What I remember most about the office are a couple crayon drawings of.

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McGinniss in Los Angeles

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ings, done by his children in elementary school, that
were hanging on the wall.

Behind his desk there were cartons containing copies
of his book, “To Seek a Newer World.” which was about
to come out at the time. What I remember most about him
was how ill at ease he seemed.

How much difficulty he seemed to have in talking
to someone he did not know. Shyness is as public a
man as Robert Kennedy seemed impossible but shy is
the way he struck me.

We talked—he talked, mostly; haltingly, his voice
often trailing off, his sentences often grammatically incom-
plete—for 45 minutes.

As I got up to leave he wished me luck, and, thinking
briefly, perhaps, of what he knew of guns and bullets,
said, “If you get up near, ah, areas where’s there’s trouble,
aha, be careful.” I told him I would, and he said, “I wouldn’t
want to hear that anything had happened.”

Then he reached behind his desk and picked up one
of the books.

“Here, why don’t I give you this,” he said, and he in-
scribed it, “For Joe McGinnis, with best wishes for the
future—and if you find the answer, please let me know.”

Then he gave me another copy of the book and asked
me to deliver it to a reporter for the New York Times in
Vietnam named Johnny Apple. This copy was inscribed,
“Here is the answer. Read it before it’s too late.”

THEN he gave me a letter of introduction to Apple. I
cannot remember the wording exactly but it was
written in typical Bob Kennedy irony and said some-
thing like, “Please try to refrain from being your usual
arrogant self and be nice to this young man and help him
win a Pulitzer Prize.”

He told me to please see him when I got back be-
cause he would like to hear my impressions. This I con-
idered traditionally political politeness and had no intention
of doing so, but sometime in February I got a letter
from him saying that he had seen a couple of the pieces I
had written and would like to see the rest if it were con-
venient for me to send him a set.

It was not long afterward that he decided to run
for President. In Washington, the day he announced,
things were too hectic for more than a brief hello, but
the day after Lyndon Johnson’s announcement that he
would not run again. I was with Kennedy in a private
room at LaGuardia Airport waiting for his campaign
plane to leave for Philadelphia.

What was mostly on his mind was Mr. Johnson but he
was still too stunned to make much sense talking about it
and soon the conversation went around to the problems of
poverty and racial hatred about which he feels so strongly.

The talk was about what the summer looked like and
to Kennedy it did not look good. Then someone mentioned
Martin Luther King and the proposed march of the poor
to Washington.

“He can’t control them anymore,” Kennedy said. “He
hasn’t had any real power for two years. They’ve moved
past him. They believe too much in violence now.”

Then he suddenly turned to me and said, “Hey, that
sounded quite like a trip you had through the delta.”

HE LOST in Oregon and took it like a gentleman. He
did not try to say he won. Then he went on tele-
vision with Gene McCarthy and showed that he had
more than glamour and money; that he had poise and a
mind that worked.

He won the race he had to win in California and after-
ward he appeared full of the good humor and wit that is
so much a part of him.

Then he got shot in the head, like his brother.
We Apologize

The Inquirer profoundly regrets offending its readers—and they have just and proper cause for offense — by publication of the column by Joe McGinniss on the front page of this newspaper last Thursday in which he referred to the United States as “a cesspool” and “a vision of hell.”

We did not then—nor do we now—concur with those abominable descriptions of our country. We share the feeling of outrage expressed by many who have written to us protesting the use of such vile language and slanderous derogation of America.

Mr. McGinniss, and all columnists whose writings appear in this newspaper, express their personal views only. It is The Inquirer’s policy to allow columnists reasonably free rein, within the bounds of accuracy and good taste, to give voice to their opinions, pro and con, on a full range of controversial issues of the day.

Sometimes, unfortunately, columnists caught up in the frenzy of a highly emotional moment exceed the bounds of good taste, as was the case in regard to the McGinniss column of last Thursday. In this instance, The Inquirer compounded the error by publishing the offensive material.

In the interests of fairness, readers of the particular column in question ought to bear in mind that it was written at a time when Senator Robert F. Kennedy had just been shot, and was not yet dead. Mr. McGinniss obviously was much distraught, as were all of us, and he was responding immaturely and emotionally to the overwhelming horror of the moment. He surely did not intend his phraseology to be taken literally.

Whatever his intentions, we want to be sure there are no doubts about the position of The Inquirer. We vigorously condemn his blasphemy of America.