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Free For All

Sometimes, Assassination Is the Right Way

James Turner Johnson's recapitulation of Western civilization's scholarly judgments on the morality of assassination versus war ["Why We Shouldn't Assassinate Muammar Qaddafi," Outlook, April 20] leaves the argument just as it has always been: unsatisfying and unsettled.

Yes, as individuals and societies we instinctively shrink from the idea of assassination as a political tool, and, yes, we applaud and support sanguinary "just" wars like the struggle to stop Hitler's Germany from imposing its hegemony and moral code on Europe. Yet logic tells us that the successful assassination of Adolf Hitler at any time between 1936 and 1945 would have deflected and eventually halted Nazi aggression and saved, literally, millions of lives. And it is at least arguable that the elimination of the Castro brothers in Cuba early in the 1960s would have spared this hemisphere a great deal of political, financial and human suffering.

Before anyone leaps to the conclusion that I believe assassination is always a more efficacious political tool than war, let it be pointed out that the assassination of Gen. Hideki Tojo or Emperor Hirohito probably would not have been a profound deterrent to Japanese imperial aggression in the 1930s or 1940s; the impetus for that aggression did not come from any one dominant leader and would have prevailed despite the decapitation of any of the several military-dominated governments of the period. In fact, many historians believe that the calculated ambush and assassination of Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto by U.S. fighter pilots in April 1943 deprived the Japanese leadership of an intelligent and pragmatic counselor whose subsequent influence might have persuaded the government to end the war sooner than it did.

Assassination, like war, is a continuation of politics by other means, however much that notion may outrage Clausewitzian scholars. I suspect that our Western distaste for assassination stems from two sources, one instinctive and the other merely historical. Our species shrinks from cold-blooded, face-to-face killing of our own kind (though less so, it would seem, than most other mammals). War, which helps make the act of killing impersonal, overcomes that innate revulsion.

Historically, kings and autocrats have had a vested interest in conducting their political killings at a distance and in protecting their own skins. Hence, in addition to promoting the idea of their own divine selection, very early on they must have fostered the idea that it is somehow more reprehensible to kill a king than to slaughter a battalion of soldiers or the inhabitants of a village. The Borgias, who killed their peers more or less personally, and Niccolò Machiavelli, who counseled "When you strike at a prince, strike to kill," have therefore been reviled by popular historians. But histories and philosophical treatises on statecraft are written by statesmen and their courtiers, not by infantry grunts or orphaned peasants.

So Johnson and the sophisticated philosophers he cites remain only that—sophists, seeking to rationalize the irrational notion that it is better for dozens, hundreds, even millions to die in war than for one self-elected tyrant to be killed in cold blood.

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