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Steven Alan Samson

Liberty University, ssamson@liberty.edu

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ASSASSINATION AND THE DEATH OF POLITICS

Steven Alan Samson

The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places; how are the mighty fallen! (2 Sam. 1:19)

The assassination of Israeli's prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, moments after speaking of his hopes for peace at a large public rally in Tel Aviv gives his death the added poignancy of the image of an old soldier giving up his life in the pursuit of peace. But the assassin's bullets were also aimed at the heart of an entire nation.

It may indeed be true, as Simone Weil observed, that the destruction of a city is the greatest calamity that can befall the human race. The scope of the horrors that have accompanied twentieth century warfare and ethnic strife is unimaginable. This may be why few occasions are more calculated to cut us to the quick and fewer more dramatically expose our vulnerability than the assassination of a national leader. It reduces the unimaginable to human scale.

The word "assassin" derives from the name given a secret Muslim fraternity in the Middle Ages called the "hashish-eaters." The young initiates into this cult were transported to "paradise" during a drug-induced stupor, permitted to sample its pleasures, then afterwards "brought down to earth" and instructed to kill the enemies of the sect, whether rival Muslims or Christian crusaders. It is hard to imagine a more fanatical foe than one who knows he will be immediately transported to paradise if he dies in the service of his deity. We need only to mention the Viking berserkers, the

Turkish janissaries, or the Japanese *kamikaze* pilots to sense the terror they struck into the hearts of their enemies.

This also describes the relationship that assassination bears to politics. It is the pursuit of political goals by non-political means. Political terror, whether it takes the form of random acts of violence or takes aim at key individuals, is designed to weaken an established political order by intimidating and demoralizing the entire body politic. The word "terrorism" was introduced into the English language in 1795 around the time of Maximilian Robespierre's Reign of Terror in revolutionary France. But like the old blunderbuss it is an extremely volatile weapon. In the end, Robespierre's head joined those of his victims in the basket at the base of the guillotine.

The rise of systematic, state-sponsored terrorism on an international scale and the cooperation of various terrorist factions in recent decades has made Americans more security-conscious, but its precedents may be found in ancient times, as for instance in the lists of proscriptions that marked the century-long decline and fall of the Roman Republic. These early bills of attainder put a price on the heads of leading citizens who were members of one or another of the political factions that persecuted each other in turn as their political fortunes rose or fell. Beginning with the Gracchus brothers, factional leaders sought to extend their terms of office and some even raised private armies. Populist demagogues would alternate with defenders of the old order. Among the great names of the day -- Marius, Sulla, Catiline, Crassus, Pompey, Caesar, Cicero, and Mark Antony -- only Sulla died in bed.

An abundance of parallels with Rabin's assassination may also be found in

contemporary examples. Anwar al-Sadat and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi sought to bring peace to heal the wounds of war in Egypt and India respectively, only to be murdered by fanatical co-religionists. Emperor Haile Selassie, who so dramatically appealed to the League of Nations to take action against Italian aggression in the 1930s, was murdered by Marxist rebels nearly forty years later. Jordan's King Hussein and Fidel Castro have both survived numerous attempts on their lives.

Assassination has clearly altered the course of history in unanticipated and sometimes almost unfathomable ways. The assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother three weeks before the assassination of President Kennedy led to a further deepening of American intervention into Vietnam. The murder of the Archduke Francis Ferdinand by a member of the Serbian Black Hand precipitated the First World War and hangs like a shadow over the events in that region today. The assassination of a British prime minister in 1812 delayed the offering of concessions to the United States that might have prevented the War of 1812. In the 16th century, Spain's Philip II put a price on the head of the hero of Dutch independence, William the Silent, who recovered from one assassin's bullet and sought to make peace before falling three years later to another's. It took an additional six decades before Spain recognized Dutch independence.

The assassination of William the Silent is also notable for its connection with another of history's great calamities: mass murder or genocide on religious or ideological grounds. Entire cities were destroyed by the Spaniards under the Duke of Parma, who also condemned all heretics -- that is, Protestants -- to death. The Thirty

Years War, which destroyed much of Germany, ended in a peace of exhaustion and led to a period of more limited warfare. The French Revolution was the major proving ground of modern ideological warfare. Many of the familiar techniques of modern journalism, propaganda, and partisan politics, not to mention clothing fashions, may be traced to revolutionary France. Nationalism, socialism, communism, and anarchism owe much of their character to French revolutionary ideologies.

Hannah Arendt's theory of modern totalitarianism included anti-Semitism as one of the basic ingredients. Pogroms [genocide] against Jews swept through Russia and Poland late in the 19th century. Other groups, like the Armenians, suffered tremendous losses at the hands of Turkish nationalists. The Jewish industrialist, Walther Rathenau, whose economic policies helped keep Germany going during the First World War, was murdered by a German nationalist in an act of anti-Semitic violence that presaged the rise of Hitler's thugs. The word "thug," by the way, comes from the Hindu Thuggees, a band of professional robbers and cutthroats who terrorized British India.

But let us now bring these reflections back into sharper focus so we may see this unhappy event in terms of a more specifically Israeli context. The Rabin assassination may be just the latest episode in a long-standing internal quarrel over the nature of Israel itself. During two years since the Israeli government reached an accord with Palestinian leaders, the debate in Israel over the future of the occupied West Bank and its Jewish settlements has degenerated into wild accusations and character assassination. Gen. Rabin, the hero of the Six Day War in 1967, was publicly attacked as a murderer and traitor. Some militant rabbis reportedly called for his assassination

for appeasing Israel's enemies and giving away historical Israeli territory. Those who have been arrested in connection with the murder live in the West Bank settlements and have been linked to religious nationalists associated with late Rabbi Meir Kahane, the founder of the militant Jewish Defense League who was murdered five years ago in New York by an Arab extremist.

What might further polarize the already divisive debate in Israel over who is to control the West Bank is the fact that this assassination is not the first of its kind in modern-day Israel.

Before examining the Palestinian background of this dispute, let us first reach back to an even earlier period. More than any other event it is the Jewish civil war described by Josephus that seems to loom in the background. In New Testament times, bands of Zealots were formed to protest Roman rule and to terrorize Jews who cooperated with the Roman authorities. They wished to drive out all intruders and restore the nation and reclaim the territory of Israel. Armed with daggers, the Zealots often operated in the open, dispatching their victims with a quick thrust of the blade and then melting away into the milling crowd. Instead, this civil war eventually ended in the Diaspora, the dispersion of Jews among the nations, held together chiefly through a rich community life and educational system that preserved their traditions.

At the turn of this century, the Zionist movement had begun actively seeking to establish a Jewish national homeland in Palestine, which was then held by the dying Ottoman Empire. After the British seized the area during the First World War, the government's Balfour Declaration opened the doors to a high level of Jewish

immigration from central and eastern Europe. In the early 1930s Zionists in Palestine split over how to respond to growing Arab and German anti-Jewish pogroms. One faction was called the Revisionists and was a precursor to the Likud Party. Led by Vladimir Jabotinsky, it sought to organize an international boycott of Nazi Germany. The other faction, the ancestor of Rabin's Labour Party, made peace overtures to Palestinian Arabs and sent its leader, Chaim Arlosoroff, to Berlin in 1933 to secure the release and transfer of German Jews who wished to emigrate to Palestine.

Soon after his return from Germany, Arlosoroff was murdered on a beach in Tel Aviv, allegedly by a Jewish zealot. The accused murderer, Avraham Stavsky, was exonerated and released, but the recriminations continued to intensify. In 1948, while newly independent Israel was fighting for its life against its Arab neighbors, Stavsky and several other members of Irgun were killed while transporting arms and volunteers to aid the war effort. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, who feared that these radicals were plotting to overthrow his government, sought to prevent the ship from landing. It was future Labour Party Prime Minister Rabin who fired upon the ship. And it was future Likud Party Prime Minister Menachem Begin who made a passionate appeal for calm that prevented a civil war.

To what extent future events will also be shaped by a vendetta between these two factions remains to be seen. Will this latest act of violence -- and perhaps vengeance -- drive an even deeper wedge between the heirs to this dispute? As a general rule, we might conclude that a fixation on the purity of political outcomes at the expense of the integrity of the political process leads people away from politics to the

realm of ideology, from civility to fanaticism. This is the way nations and civilizations perish.

In the end, what can we say? A fixation on the purity of political outcomes at the expense of the integrity of the political process leads us away from politics to the realm of ideology, from civility to fanaticism. This, too, is the way nation and civilizations perish.

Few acts are more demoralizing or more destructive of civility than random violence. Few civilizations that plunge into its deepening vortex ever recover.

Half a century ago, soon after the fall of Paris to the German army in 1940, the philosopher Simone Weil wrote an essay on the Iliad, noting that the greatest calamity the human race can experience is the destruction of a city. Few calamities resonate with greater intensity even centuries later than the fall of Troy, Carthage, Jerusalem, and Constantinople. But only half a century later we might be consider adding another calamity to the list: the assassination of a political leader.

The causes of these misfortunes vary widely. Pompeii, How easy it is to illustrate her point by recalling some notable historical footnotes. The sack of Carthage by the Romans removed the chief obstacle to Rome's conquest of the Mediterranean basin. The sack of Rome in 1527 humbled the papacy, brought the Renaissance to an

abrupt end, and signaled an intensification of national rivalries that would trouble Europe for centuries. The forced evacuation of Phnom Penh in 1975 and the systematic murder of the leading classes of Cambodia by fanatical revolutionaries left a power vacuum that provided the leaders of Vietnam with an excuse to occupy the country. Late in the 20th century, it seems appropriate to add a second calamity: the assassination of a leader.

Not unknown in ancient times, as the Roman proscriptions bear witness, political assassination has come to be a distinctly modern form of warfare, although it draws upon ancient enmities. It tends to be associated with political, religious, and ideological fanaticism, both revolutionary and reactionary. Just as disturbing is the theological sanction it has often received. In this regard the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish extremist merely reflects a recurrent pattern to which even Israel has not been immune. Richard Cohen recently cited the murder in 1933 of Chaim Arlosoroff, a leader of a precursor to Rabin's Labour Party.

It is an act of terror designed to overthrow an existing political order and bring a nation to its knees by demoralizing it. The history of assassination begins with who gave us the name. Young initiates into the order were offered a drug-enhanced excursion into a sensual commissioned by a Persian sheikh known as the "Old Man of the Mountain" to murder its opponents, including Crusaders.