A Wound Left Unhealed
Looking back at another time of war and a leader silenced too soon.

By Frey Gaillard, B.A.'68

He had come to Nashville on this particular occasion to deliver a speech at Vanderbilt University. More than 10,000 people waited for him there, but the people at the airport wanted a glimpse of him, too, and when he disembarked from the railing and resumed his slow journey in the direction of the car, the force of the crowd was nearly overwhelming. He was in the middle of it, wide-eyed and trying to stay upright, shoving to keep up with Kennedy, whom I was supposed to introduce. When we finally squeezed through the doors of the airport terminal, it was raining outside — a cold and windy drizzle that would soon turn to ice.

I had an umbrella clutched tightly in my hand, but it was still closed, and in the delirious surge of bodies there was no way to open it, or even to lift my arm. It struck me then that the crowd, though friendly, was edging toward a mob, caught up in a kind of Pied Piper blindness for which I feel no nostalgia. But for the slouched and slender man at the center of it, there are those — and I suppose I am one — who still feel a nostalgia that borders on an ache.

When he died 74 days later, you knew with a certainty beyond shock and grief that American politics would be the same. And it isn’t. Kennedy came to Vanderbilt to serve as keynoter for the IMPACT symposium, a student-run speakers program that had brought a number of celebrities to the campus — William Buckley, Martin Luther King, Stoke- ly Carmichael and Barry Goldwater, to name just a few. Kennedy’s speech was at least as memorable as any of the others. He spoke during a time of war and division, of urban riots and racial injustice, and against that backdrop he talked about the patriotism of dissent. It was, he thought, the duty of the people who loved their country to speak out strongly against its imperfections.

“There are millions of Americans,” he declared, “living in hidden places, whose faces and names we will never know. But I have seen children starving in Mississippi, sailing their lives away in the ghetto, living without hope or future amidst the despair on Indian reservations, with no jobs and little hope. I have seen proud men in the hills of Appalachia who wish only to work in dignity — but the mines are closed, and the jobs are gone and no one, neither industry or labor or government, has cared enough to help. Those conditions will change, those children will live, only if we dis- sent. So I dissent, and I know you do, too.”

For some of us at least, those words are haunting. 35 years later, as we enter the primary season now, scholars have picked their way through the pain. I don’t mean to idealize Kennedy. For some, he was not cynical. Even in the ‘60s, some were unconvinced by his urgency, seeing him as a cynical and ruthless politician. And even his admirers had to acknowledge that he could be ruthless, or at least so driven that you couldn’t tell the difference. But he was not cynical.

I remember the car ride from the airport to Vanderbilt — three Tennessee politicians crowded into the front seat, while Kennedy shared the back with John Glenn and one slightly awed student who was astonished by the frankness of it all as the politicians tried to tell Kennedy what to say and not to say. It’s a campus audience, they told him, so talk about the Viet- nam War if you want. But this is still the South, so go a little easy on the issue of race.

Kennedy listened for a while, then turned to me and asked with- out warning: “What do you think I ought to say tonight?”

I hesitated briefly, then told him it was fine to talk about the war, but I also thought he should talk about poverty and injustice at home. I told him it was true those subjects were still sensitive in the South, but that was all the more reason to address them there — and that he might be surprised by the sympathy of the crowd.

“Thank you,” he said. “That’s what I’ll do.”

Then he sank into himself and rode along in silence, brooding enigmatically as the politi- cians in the front seat, “talking to the wind,” as one of King’s aides, “was that maybe the South has rested, that maybe Bobby Kennedy would come up with some answers.”

For the next two months, a lot of people held grimly to that hope, especially as Kennedy did well in the primaries, and the thought began slowly to form in our minds that despite all the tragedy and despair of the decade — the war and the riots and the murder of good men — Robert Kennedy might be the next president.

He might find the policies to implement his vision, and the country might find a way through its pain. But then in the first week of June he was gone, following unbelievably in the martyred path of Dr. King. In a way, it was the culmination of the ‘60s, the death of a prom- ise that had been so strong.

Thirty-five years later, it seems clear enough that the wound to the country has never really healed. The politics of the 1960s — the cynicism born on a California night when the most decent politician of our time lay in a spreading pool — continued on page 85
Harvey Cox. Along the way, he mentions relationships of contemporary Protestant theologian son & Johnson and Chick-fil-A, and the writings of contemporary Protestant theologian Victor's work experience reflects his broad academic interests. Starting with an undergraduate degree in sociology, he moved from social work to service as executive director of a system of 20 day-care centers, then on to management consulting on day-care issues. Drawn to graduate school in business ("I just needed to know more"), he earned a Ph.D. in business administration at the University of North Carolina. After teaching at the universities of Nebraska and North Carolina, he took a plum position at the Institute for Management Development International (IMD) in Lausanne, Switzerland. ("It's a world-renowned place that's kind of part western business school and part executive development laboratory," says Barry.) Victor taught there three years and ran the IMD's program for executive development.

What drew him to Vanderbilt in 1999 was the potential for interdisciplinary collaboration inherent in the Cal Turner Chair in Moral Leadership. The chair is part of an entire program in moral leadership, endowed in 1994 by Vanderbilt trustee Cal Turner Jr., BA’62, the recently retired CEO of Dollar General Corp., which brings together Vanderbilt's professional schools (medicine, law, nursing, divinity and business) to explore topics that present ethical issues for all, such as genetic research.

Under the auspices of the Cal Turner Program, Victor leads an interdisciplinary course in moral leadership offered through both Owen and the Divinity School that is open to students of all the University's professional schools and is co-taught by Victor and faculty from the various schools. Similarly, his Turner Program connections have led him to invite faculty from the other schools into his Ethics in Business course to expand the frame of reference.

"Bringing together faculty and students from these other disciplines, says Victor, "allows us to deal with [ethical] problems in the way they really are. The interesting problems don't just fit here in the business school. They don't just fit in the law school. Just as business isn't simply a concern of business."

Indeed, says Victor, "business is the single most significant social defining force in the world today. It reaches everywhere. The world has never seen a social movement as significant, as powerful, as pervasive as business."

Which, come to think of it, makes the idea of teaching moral leadership in business seem all the more imperative.

Despite all the recent corporate news of accounting fraud and executive deceit, Bart Victor remains upbeat about the possibilities for American business. He sees it not as some faceless, out-of-control juggernaut but as an engine that we all have some power to control. "I like business. I think business is a great, positive thing. I think it can do awful stuff, like anything powerful. It is not simply good in and of itself. It is a human creation. We are business. We are the market. Not somebody else. So let's take responsibility for it."