

## The Added Danger of a Savage Week

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# The Added Danger of a Savage Week

It has been another deeply disturbing week for New York, but this time it is the madness of men, not the madness of machines, that strains the pride and the patience of the city's inhabitants.

Early Sunday morning, the murderous "Son of Sam" took the life of yet another victim, a young woman, with his .44-caliber pistol. Her companion was more fortunate; he lost most of his eyesight, but not his life. On Wednesday, another young New Yorker was killed, in the blast of a bomb, set off by a terrorist group that hopes, perversely, through bomb scares, evacuations and random murder to advance the cause of Puerto Rican independence.

For those who have lived through this mad week in New York there is a shared sense of outrage and of impotence. Why can't 300 policemen find "Son of Sam"? How many more innocent people will be killed by madmen with guns or bombs? Is New York City, after all, a failed ultra-urban experiment in which people eventually crack, social order eventually collapses, and reason ultimately yields to despair?

In such despair lies another danger, as great as that posed by mad gunmen or fanatic bombers: that their barbarism will provoke ours, that their contempt for the social order will be mirrored in ours. And the first signs of public reaction are troubling. A vigilante spirit stalks the streets. Decent citizens speak in a savage voice. And Mayor Beame, echoing such passions, calls for restoration of the death penalty. That solution to the crimes

of terrorism—or any crimes—is no solution at all. We know—or should know—that the death penalty does not work. The only cause it could serve would be the cause of revenge. It is human to cry out for revenge, but that alone is not reason enough to legalize the taking of human life.

The Mayor apparently does not agree. His proposal that "Son of Sam" be considered a terrorist and thus liable to the Mayor's proposed death penalty is absurd. A psychopathic killer is a psychopathic killer no matter what the Mayor may label him. For "Son of Sam" there is no punishment to fit the crime. Nor is there any threat of punishment, no matter how severe, that could have deterred him from his rampage.

For terrorists, however, there may well be a punishment that could deter. The punishment is not capital; terrorists are usually ready to die for their cause. More difficult for a terrorist to contemplate would be a very long prison term—say 35 years—without possibility of parole.

The street chorus calling for the ultimate public revenge on "Son of Sam" and the bombers does the city a disservice. The cry for vengeance contrasts sharply with the words spoken by Governor Carey in June when he vetoed a bill to restore the death penalty: "I am opposed to violence, and the ultimate that violence can bring—the death of another person." Perhaps as the passions of this week subside; New Yorkers will better comprehend these words.