An outrage

There is no way to understand random, vicious violence. All that we know is that a young woman has been cut down just as she was prepared to emerge into the world, apparently the victim of an ageless racism which sees all blacks as fit targets and all whites as superior beings who have the right to do as they will with supposedly lesser breeds. The law can and must exact retribution from whomever is guilty of the truly horrible slaying in Drew, but the law cannot bring Jo Etha Collier back to life.

Her death reminds us how close we still are to the bad old days when white made right. That there may still be young white men who think it is amusing—and acceptable—to go cruising through black sections of town looking for trouble may not be too surprising, since that was once a standard pastime, but it is nonetheless deeply disturbing. That a young teenager was killed for absolutely no reason is a fact which is more than disturbing. It is sickening.

There is probably no way to prevent it, but for once we whites should not allow ourselves the luxury of fingerpointing at other regions and other crimes. There is no excuse for what happened in Drew, no justification and no defense. It is unforgivable, brutal and shocking. Jo Etha Collier’s death is an outrage, a moral blot on this region which will not be diminished by comparing what happens here with what happens anywhere else.

Trying and convicting her killers would not return the young high school graduate to her loved ones and friends, but it would at least help to lessen the shame of what has happened. There is no need to speculate on what a failure to find and convict her killers would mean, to white no less than to black Delta. It is imperative that justice be done, and done speedily. Otherwise, what today can still be seen as an aberration, a throwback to a time we hoped to have left behind, will be seen instead as a clear indication of how little we have really progressed in our journey away from the virulent racism which has been our grievous affliction for so long.

Shameful silence

The President of the United States expressed his concern and outrage. The sheriff of Sunflower County showed his humanity, as did the mayor and police chief of Drew, by attending the funeral services for the slain Joetha Collier last Sunday. Our governor once again demonstrated his insensitivity to the needs of the moment and to simple human compassion by saying not a word at any time after the slaying of the young Drew High School graduate.

Not that John Bell Williams was alone in his silence or his inability to give witness to the brotherhood of all men. This district’s congressman, good for a quote on anti-war demonstrators in Washington or crime in Los Angeles at the drop of a reporter’s pencil, apparently decided that Drew is not on his political map. So did our lieutenant governor, whose hometown is not very far from Drew but who couldn’t muster the elemental decency, or perhaps courage in this election year, to say a word of sorrow that we could find in public print.

It is that silence which will be remembered by many Mississippians, white as well as black, almost as long as Miss Collier’s murder. It will not go unremarked elsewhere, either, by those who need little excuse to brand all white Mississippians as barbarous racists who secretly applaud each black’s death.

What could it have possibly cost our silent leaders to speak out against the tragic savagery of last week? Who can calculate what it might have meant to them, to this state, to all of us, if they had only been able to find words appropriate to the occasion?

They did not, however, and we must find a measure of redemption only in the reaction of several Sunflower County officials. If it had not been for them, the deafening silence which would have followed Joetha Collier’s murder would have been at least as shameful as the murder itself. We do not deserve leadership so false to our better instincts.