

# Studies in Disbelief

**SIX SECONDS IN DALLAS.** A Micro-Study of the Kennedy Assassination. By Josiah Thompson. Illustrated. 123 pp. New York: Berkland Golf Associates. Distributed by Random House. \$9.95.

**ACCESSORIES AFTER THE FACT.** The Warren Commission, the Authorities, and the Report. By Sylvia Meagher. 477 pp. New York & Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company. \$8.50.

By **FRED GRAHAM**

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**SOME** novelty shops are selling buttons these days that read: "Lee Harvey Oswald, Where Are You Now That We Need You?" As unfunny as this is, it makes the point that dissent sometimes takes strange forms, a phenomenon that may explain the extraordinary public distrust of the findings of the Warren Commission. The latest surveys by the Gallup and Harris polls show that six out of every ten Americans think the Warren Commission did not tell the whole story when it concluded that Oswald acted alone in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

This is an astonishing degree of disbelief in a document that has the endorsement of some of the highest officials in the Government, a reaction that nobody would have predicted when the Warren Report was published in 1964. Although this skepticism was generated by books that preceded these by Josiah Thompson and Sylvia Meagher (and also by the scatter-gun accusations of New Orleans D. A., Jim Garrison), these books afford a revealing insight into two of the key elements that produced this widespread incredulity.

Mr. Thompson's book is the nearest thing to a slow-motion replay of the assassination that the public is likely to see, and it zeroes in on the weakest link in the Warren Commission's case — that a movie taken by a bystander seems to show Kennedy and Governor

Connally being hit in rapid succession, quicker than Oswald's bolt-action rifle could possibly fire.

But the Warren Commission offered an explanation for this. It said both men were hit by the same bullet and that Governor Connally had a delayed reaction to his wound. And despite the fact that embarrassing gaffes by the Commission and inconsistencies in the evidence have been pointed out, none of the critics have been able to suggest any other explanation that fits the known facts better than the Warren Commission's. Indeed, unless Garrison has more up his sleeve than he has shown so far, nobody has come up with any credible evidence that others were involved.

Yet disbelief in the official explanation grows. Sylvia Meagher's book suggests a reason why: the Warren Commission has fallen victim to the Johnson Administration's credibility gap. Whether it is justified or not, many people are convinced that when truth is unpleasant these days the Government often tells lies. This erosion of confidence in the official word has undercut the very theory upon which the Commission was founded — that the presence of high Government officials on the panel would commend its findings to the people.

Disbelief is aprecedented form of political dissent in this country — the old guard could never believe that F.D.R. didn't know about Pearl Harbor in advance, and the liberals insisted that the F.B.I. framed Alger Hiss — and Miss Meagher's book brings into the open some of the political underpinning of the Warren Commission's credibility problem. She makes no bones about the fact that her initial skepticism was based on political instincts and not facts.

As a Stevensonian liberal only recently converted to Kennedyism, she saw in him hopes of "an end to the cold war and a beginning of genuine peace. In a very candid fore-

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- The New York Times \_\_\_\_\_
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word to her book, she concedes that as soon as she heard of Kennedy's death and a friend indicated it was probably a Birchite plot, she said that the official explanation would blame a Communist. When the "establishment" Warren Commission fingered Oswald, a former defector to Russia,

she went to work to expose its errors.

To prove her case she first compiled and published an index to the 26 volumes of Warren Commission evidence. In the process she found a number of inconsistencies and contradictions that convinced her that her reflex prediction of a white-wash had been right.

Unfortunately, her meticulous skills as an indexer carried over to produce a book that is a bore. It catalogues the weak spots in the Warren Report and intersperses the inconsistent material she discovered, but there is little organization and no change of pace. She does not appear to have unearthed any new shockers but this is not certain; she cries "wolf" so often that a big bad one could have slipped by unnoticed in the pack.

Miss Meagher concludes with a call for a new official study. It will be long in coming if the decision-makers read her book, because it presents such a hopeless picture of confusion and contradiction in the available evidence that any reader would conclude that a second study could do no more than inspire another round of critical books.

Although Mr. Thompson teaches philosophy at Haverford, his book (one of the 16 that have been published so far debunking the Warren Report) paradoxically ignores human factors and concentrates on physical, scientific evidence.

Mr. Thompson's method is to magnify, measure and analyze every available shred of physical evidence of the fatal six seconds. Because so many pictures were taken of the President's motorcade before, during and after the assassination (especially by the movie camera of Abraham Zapruder, who photographed the open limousine

while most of the shooting was going on) he was able to stage a persuasive re-creation of the scene.

By focusing his study on the men in the car as the bullets began to strike, he concludes that there were at least three snipers, who fired at least four bullets into the President's car. Each point is painstakingly supported by photos, calculations, charts and sketches.

Yet his technique of magnifying the effect in hopes of learning the cause is reminiscent of the man who concluded that the winds in Kansas were caused by the water rushing up from the ground and turning the big fans in all those back yards. By ignoring the larger logic of the Warren Report, Mr. Thompson's analysis ultimately makes less sense.

For example, he studied the pictures until he thought he knew the exact position of Governor Connally at the moment when he appeared to be hit by a bullet. Then he calculated the bullet's trajectory through the Governor's body, relying on the reports of the physicians and the F.B.I. investigators, and sighted backward. From this he concluded that the gunman who shot Connally must have been on the roof of one of two buildings to the east of the Dallas School Book Depository Building, where Oswald's sniper's nest was located.

Mr. Thompson's trajectory theory flies in the face of the fact that only one of the 190 witnesses he cited said a shot might have come from these other buildings. It also ignores such background factors as the slim likelihood that the loner Oswald would or could be a part of such a clocklike conspiracy, and the fact that Oswald took his job at the School Book Depository before anybody knew that Kennedy would come to Dallas and pass that way.

THE evidence of the third marksman is postulated in much the same way. A close study of the Zapruder frames showed that President Kennedy's head jerked forward and then violently backward as the top of his head was blown off.

From this and a "hazy" photograph that can be read as showing a person behind a fence to Kennedy's front, Thompson concludes that a shot from a heavier-caliber weapon struck the President's forehead a split second after Oswald's first shot hit the back of his skull.

This is slender evidence to support the statement on the dust jacket that the book succeeds in "proving that three gunmen murdered the President."

Although it has seemed that the flow of anti-Warren Report books would never end, these two may represent a sweet climax. Neither adds any important disclosures, and unless someone can come up with a new slant, as Mr. Thompson did, further books would be hard to justify. Meanwhile, events may dissipate the climate that is now so receptive to Warren Report critiques.

When the X-rays and pictures of the President's wounds are released to experts in 1971, this should confirm the autopsy report that only one bullet struck his head, and it might show that the first round did pass through his body and proceed toward Governor Connally. This would resolve the most doubtful factual issue in favor of the Commission, and time or politics must eventually take care of the rest.

**WHAT** does this collection of new evidence prove? It does not prove that the assassination was a conspiracy . . . Nor does it prove Oswald's innocence. What it does suggest is that there are threads in this case that should have been unraveled long ago instead of being swept under the Archives rug.—"Six Seconds In Dallas."