

ASSASSINATION:

Any Number Can Play

STUDY THE PAST, says the inscription chiseled in stone outside the National Archives on Washington's Pennsylvania Avenue, and rarely have so many amateur scholars followed the command into the dusty reliquary of U.S. history. The

well-beaten path leads upstairs to the East Search Room, where, almost any day, a visitor can find one or two instant historians poring over some of the 300 cubic feet of evidence generated by the assassination. The name of the game, who killed John F. Kennedy? And the answer, for the people disposed to play it, is rarely the simple verdict the Warren Commission rendered: Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone.

Three years after the fact, the will to doubt that verdict is stronger and more intractable than ever. Dissent has become a cult with its own true believers—a subculture of assassination buffs who obsessively probe the mass record, swap their findings and publish new and ever more elaborate conspiracy theories. And they have created a growing market: a recent Louis Harris poll showed that three-fifths of the American public doubts the assassination was the work of one man—nearly double the level of two years ago (NEWSWEEK, Oct. 10).

It is a game any number can play, and it was still proliferating last week:

Hard-cover sales of "Rush to Judgment," lawyer Mark Lane's defense brief for Oswald, passed 90,000 and kept the book second on The New York Times

nonfiction best-seller list. Edward Jay Epstein's "Inquest," a made-over master's thesis attacking the Warren commission's methods, topped 20,000 and flooded paperback racks with 325,000 just-published copies. Esquire magazine gave Epstein eight pages in its December issue to analyze no fewer than 35 extant theories contradicting the commission's. A New York television station scheduled a three-hour November postmortem starring Lane and other critics of the commission. The foreign press splashed the doubters' accounts, often with we-told-you-so glee. And even London's sober Sunday Times ventured that the Warren report "appears a vulnerable document."

■ Demonologist Penn Jones Jr., the otherwise obscure owner-editor of the tiny (circulation: 765) Midlothian, Texas, Mirror, found a bigger, flossier forum in California's Ramparts magazine for the most Byzantine tale to date. By Jones's count, ten persons touched in one way or another by the assassination had met "mysterious deaths"—a catchall term that includes a karate chop, a slit throat, two heart attacks, two auto accidents and the demise by "acute barbiturate and alcohol intoxication" of Hearst columnist Dorothy Kilgallen. Introducing Jones, Ramparts playfully paralleled his theory with that of the death "curse" on those who opened King Tut's tomb. But the magazine gave him twenty pages and a widely reported Washington press conference, at which Jones