

A Liberal View

I have just read a book which shakes for the first time the belief I have had in the report of the Warren Commission.

The book is "Inquest", by Edward J. Epstein. It is written without hysterics or histrionics, in a style economical, unadorned, and scholarly. In fact, it was started as a master's thesis at Cornell under Andrew Hacker, and the author is still a graduate student at Harvard.



Max Lerner
What Epstein has done notably has been to shift attention from the various studies of the assassination itself to a study of the Warren Commission and its staff and how they went at their work.

HE SIMPLY interviewed them, along with studying the record. I agree with Richard Rovere, writing the Introduction, when he says that this approach is one that the journalists should have taken long ago.

It is one that they are usually good at—how did a story develop and break?—in place of the let-me-play-juror approach in which most of the commentary got bogged down.

The author discovered from his interviews and from the internal evidence in the report that the commission and staff did a needlessly sloppy job, that there was constant quarreling between them, that they didn't interview witnesses or follow up trails that might have led them into difficulties they wanted to avoid, that they glossed over gaps in the hard evidence and selected the facts that told the story in the terms on which the commission had broadly agreed, that they may even have tampered with the autopsy report.

Why? The author's answer is partly that the staff defined its limits of investigation too narrowly, and was constantly pressed for time in drawing the report.

But basically his answer is that the com-

mission did not conceive its task to be the establishment of the truth, whatever the consequences, but the establishment of the political truth.

Political truth is like reason of state: it is what is deemed most expedient in the national interest. The chief justice accepted his task unwillingly but took it because an investigation had to be made to clear away the rumors and the wild talk of conspiracies.

The report had to be out well before the presidential elections so that it would not become an election issue.

Epstein feels that these urgencies kept the report from being thorough enough.

Most of all, he insists that a film of the shooting showed that, given the elapsed time between the shots, the shooting could have been done by one man only if the same bullet passed through Kennedy and hit Connally, and he flatly accuses the commission of having tampered with an original autopsy report in order to leave this possibility open.

The staff now answers that Epstein was not thorough enough in his research, and that there was no tampering.

To the dismay of those who feel that the whole assassination was a conspiracy, that Oswald was framed, and that two or more people—neither of them Oswald—did it, Epstein believes that Oswald was one of the assassins, but that there must have been another.

He rests his case on the autopsy version which makes the one-shot theory untenable, and thus ends with a two-assassins-including-Oswald theory.

I AM NOT impressed by the two-assassins theory because I want to know more about the autopsy report.

But meanwhile Epstein has turned up enough to make me feel that the Warren Report was not the exacting piece of work it should have been.