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SHADOW
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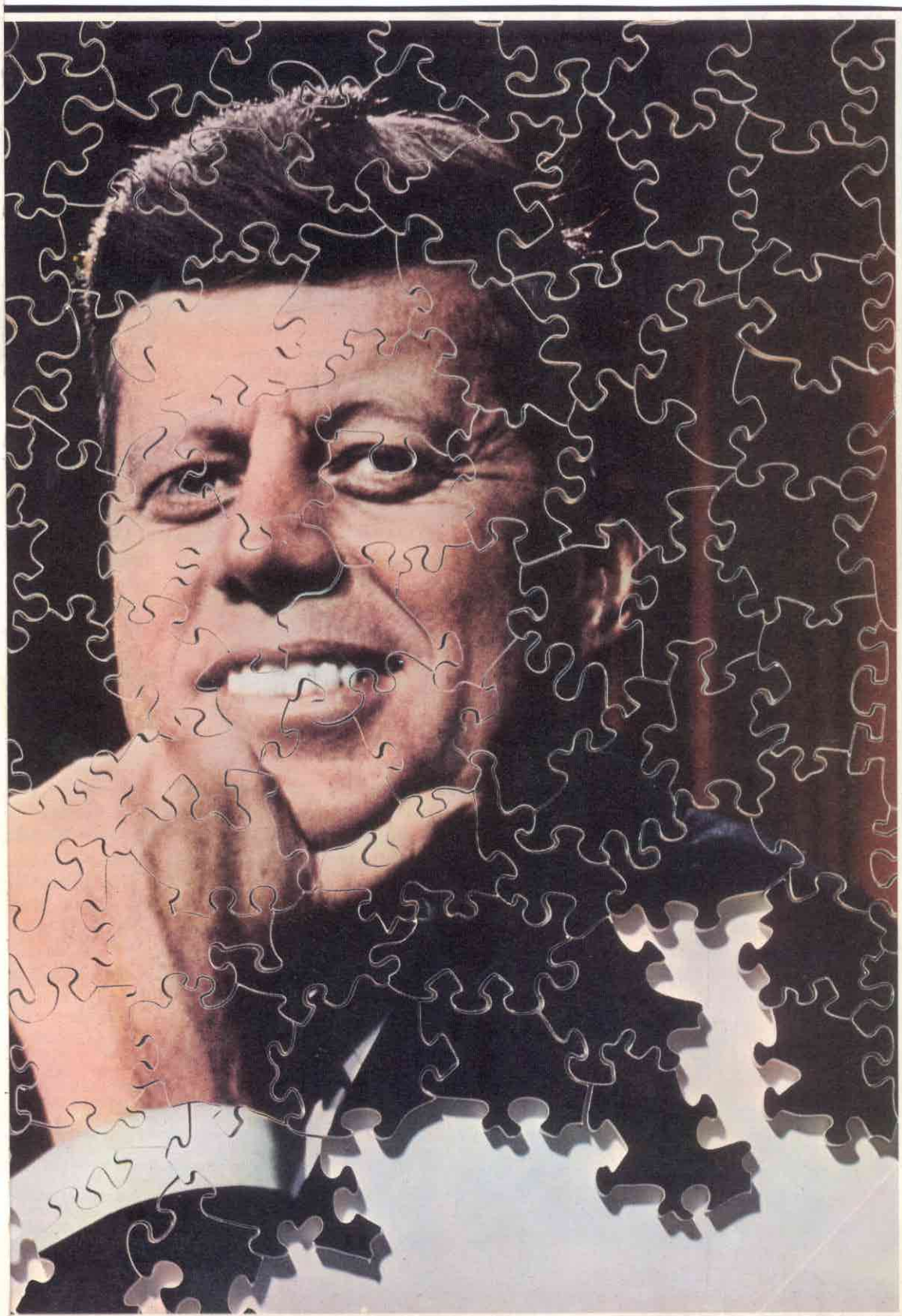
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Opinion:



THE VIETNAM ELECTIONS

by Marshall Windmiller

I SPENT TEN DAYS in Saigon just before the election interviewing politicians, Buddhist leaders, intellectuals, Catholics and students. Among these people cynicism and contempt for the government were the overwhelming sentiments and the elections were regarded as a farce.

In the electoral history of Vietnam, elections have been tightly controlled charades designed to enable authoritarian governments to claim legitimacy and popular support.

This has been the pattern in both North and South Vietnam, and the respective regimes have always pointed with pride to the large voter turnout as evidence of popular support for the government and its electoral procedures. In the National Assembly elections in North Vietnam on May 8, 1960, 97% of the eligible voters voted and a third of the polling centers even recorded a 100% turnout. Ho Chi Minh was returned in his constituency by 99% of the voters. Similarly, in the Presidential election in South Vietnam held on April 9, 1961, 85% of the electorate voted and Premier Ngo Dinh Diem received 89% of the total. In the National Assembly elections held September 27, 1963, just before the overthrow of the Diem regime, 93% of the voters voted, and Diem received 99.9% and Madame Nhu received 99.8%.

Few American commentators would now assert that any of the above events represent even an approximation of democracy. But with the announcement by the Saigon government that the voter turnout in the September 11, 1966 elections was 80.8%, American government and journalistic opinion hailed the election as a great step to-

ward democracy. "It shows," said the President's foreign policy adviser, W. W. Rostow, "that the people of this country, by and large, given the chance to vote, move in the direction of democracy. It's a good step and heartening for all those in the world who believe that in the end power resides with the people."

The purpose of the election was to elect a constituent assembly of 117 members. The duty of this body is to draft a new constitution, and its composition and rules of procedure were spelled out in Decree No. 21/66 issued by the Saigon regime on June 19, 1966. Article 20 of the degree provides that the present government can amend the draft constitution in any way it likes if it can muster one-third of the votes plus one. Thus to turn the constituent assembly into a rubber stamp, the government needed to elect only 40 of its people. In its Decree No. 22/66 it made sure that this would be easy. This law describes the electoral procedures. It is a long and complicated document which I found most people, including some government officials, didn't understand. It provided for a list system of voting wherein the voters had to choose among lists rather than among individual candidates. Yet the members of the lists did not share a common party or platform. Government candidates were so distributed among the lists as to guarantee a high percentage of winners. For double insurance, military personnel were permitted to vote wherever they happened to be on election day. Thus flying squads of troops could be moved into doubtful constituencies.

THE CHOICE of candidates was not impressive, for the electoral law specifically banned "those who, directly or indirectly, act for the benefit of Communists and neutralists, or have activities that aid the Communists." The government carefully screened all candidates and admitted to having disqualified 59 out of 539 as "Communists or having a criminal record." Buddhist leaders and well-known critics of the government knew better than to apply. It is reported that there are 5000 Buddhists presently in jail because of previous political activities. Former Premier Phan Huy Quat,



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Editorial:



NOVEMBER 22, 1966

OUR FIRST INCLINATION was to believe the Warren Commission. Along with the majority of Americans and a large plurality of the American press, we were awed by the absolute massiveness of the Commission's 26 volumes. By the literal weight of the evidence, Oswald had to have murdered the President, alone, as the Commission found.

It has been difficult to dislodge us of that conviction. We believe in the capricious nature of history. We are not conspiracy-prone. And we were, frankly, unwilling to embrace the frightening extensions of the proposition that the Commission was wrong.

The first manuscript seriously questioning the Commission's conclusion came into our editorial rooms over a year ago. It was a reasoned essay by an established writer, but we declined to publish it at that time. We elected to withhold any comment on the assassination until we were convinced that the Commission had actually compromised the truth about the assassination. We are now certain of that.

In the past eight months a team of RAMPARTS editors, aided by researchers and trained investigators, has read, re-read, catalogued and analyzed the 26 volumes of the Warren Report. They have traveled to Dallas a dozen times, and interviewed nearly 100 people throughout the country knowledgeable about the assassination. They have come to the conclusion that the Warren Commission has done the country an enormous disservice; that not only the odds but the evidence are against its conclusion; that the weight of evidence indicates the existence of more than one assassin.

INDEED, THERE would seem to be two conspiracies. One was to murder the President. The other was to cover up the blunders of various federal and state agencies which made the assassination possible, and to present the public with a panacea.

We do not believe the two conspiracies are related. We pray they are not. But as is becoming clear with so many things about the assassination, we just don't know.

This uncertainty is traceable to the large amount of basic evidence relating to the President's murder that is being withheld from the public. More than one-third of the reports in the National Archives relating to the assassination are kept classified by "interested agencies"—half the FBI reports are unavailable, most CIA investigations remain secret.

Some evidence is gone forever. The original autopsy notes were burned. The interior of the Presidential limousine was ordered destroyed by the White House. A freeway sign at the assassination site which allegedly had

a telltale bullet hole has disappeared.

One of the FBI documents that has reached the public—a report on the President's autopsy—flatly contradicts the Warren Commission autopsy version. This is extremely significant since the FBI report makes anatomically impossible the Commission's thesis of one lone gunman.

The hard evidence that would resolve this most serious question—the x-rays and autopsy photographs of the President's body—are more than unavailable. They are, astonishingly, unfindable. Also missing are several key spliced frames from the motion picture film of the amateur photographer Abraham Zapruder—evidence that is the cornerstone in the Commission's reconstruction of the murder.

The questions that Penn Jones and David Welsh raise in this issue—and the serious criticisms of the Warren Commission made in recent books by Edward Jay Epstein, Mark Lane, Leo Sauvage and others—cannot be resolved unless this evidence is released.

The responsibility for the mounting doubts, theories and confusions must therefore be placed first with the Warren Commission and now with the President who has the power to invoke a new investigation and release the necessary evidence.

It remains the continuing responsibility of the public to demand answers to the unresolved questions of the assassination. To remain silent, according to the dictates of "good taste" or out of fear of the repercussions, is no longer defensible in the light of the very serious charges, backed by substantial evidence, which have been leveled against the President's Commission.