



The Persistent Devils

THE FOUR-PROGRAM series *CBS News Inquiry: The Warren Report*, which was presented on consecutive nights on television recently, implied strongly that people who mistrust *The Official Warren Commission Report on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* could be characterized as victims of a "conspiracy mentality," prone to the "devil theory in politics." Walter Cronkite, the chief CBS News spokesman on the series, did not make this interpretation. Eric Sevareid suggested the "devil theory" notion, and Henry Steele Commager, the "conspiracy mentality" idea.

The thrust of the remarks made by both Mr. Sevareid and Mr. Commager was that the United States, since the cold war, has developed "something that might be called a conspiracy psychology." "We are on the road," said Mr. Commager, "to a paranoid explanation of things." Mr. Sevareid mentioned people who cling to illusions for years, unshaken by respectable evidence. Dr. Seymour Lipset, Harvard sociologist who also appeared on the program, reinforced the implication that the Warren Report was irrationally rejected by people who couldn't endure the thought of a President's assassination without a "rational plot." These insights followed a stout defense of the "common sense" and fundamental soundness of the Warren Re-

port's conclusions by John McCloy, a member of the President's Commission.

CBS News did not elect to answer the twin questions: "Should and could the Warren Report be believed?" It left the answers up to the viewers; but the editorial placement of the comments in the last program, coming after the presentation of criticisms of the Commission's report, tended to support the official finding that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone killer as "the best account we are ever likely to have of what happened that day in Dallas." Anyone who doubted the basic conclusion must, therefore, be a person with the "conspiracy mentality"—so ran the implication. It should be vigorously rejected. The effect of it would be to discourage further investigations into the tragic triple thread that now runs from Dallas to Washington to New Orleans. Many viewers who find serious weaknesses in the Warren Report would be unwilling to accept the charge that they suffer from a "conspiracy psychology."

CBS News Inquiry: The Warren Report, did, in fact, stir up old doubts and awaken new ones. The last program commendably repeated the Commission's charges against the FBI for its handling of the whole affair. It underscored the Commission's error in relying on the testimony of the FBI and the CIA rather than conducting its own in-

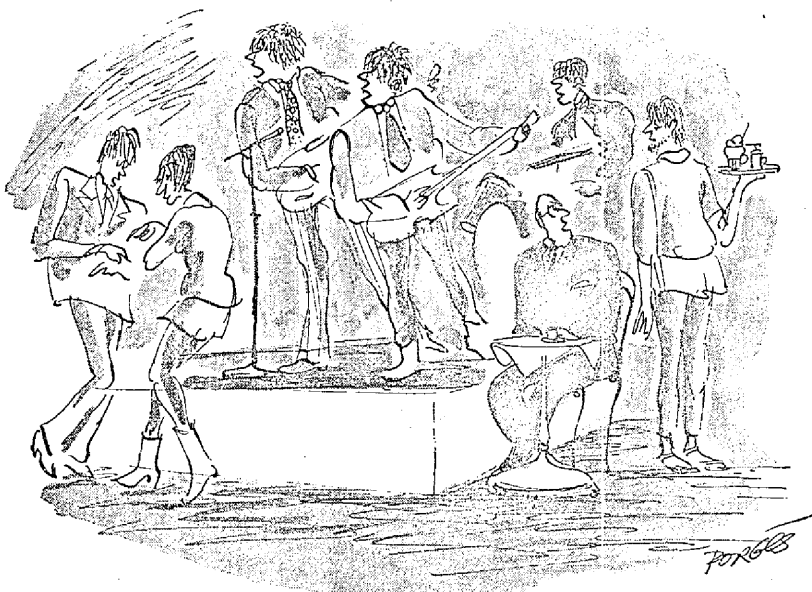
vestigation. It showed that all witnesses were not questioned; that the Commission was given only a part-time staff; that the vital X-rays and photographs made during the autopsy on the President were not published. Other weaknesses of the report were cited, and the points were made that early stories of witnesses were changed and that highly qualified experts disagreed on many controversial aspects of the testimony.

True, official investigations of complex events are always subject to human error. CBS News voiced widely expressed doubts about the Warren Report. Does that make the network newsmen who prepared the program victims of the devil theory in politics who cling to illusions in the face of respectable evidence? Because of this question the series was fraught with a basic ambiguity. Step by step, the answers given by the Warren Report to the basic questions of the assassination were substantiated. Criticisms and alternative theories were noted but overcome. The identical facts, if they had been arranged by others intent on undermining the Warren Report, could have produced opposite conclusions.

THE network seemed to wish to march irresistibly to a restoration of confidence in the report; and the "paranoid" brush, applied to doubters at the conclusion, seemed to clinch the argument. If it believed its own conclusion, how could CBS have asked for a new, independent study of the autopsy pictures, and for the release—by Time, Inc.—of the 8 mm film taken of the assassination by Abraham Zapruder? There do seem to be people in some quarters of our national life who are more prone than others to the "devil theory"; but is it reasonable to equate, as Eric Sevareid did, doubters of the Warren Report with people who believe that Roosevelt sold out at Yalta, or conspired with the Japanese in the Pearl Harbor attack?

All of us tend to see devils where we want to find them, and all of us tend to fail to see them where we don't want to find them. CBS fell into the trap of extremism in its last program of this series—an easy fall. The harder job is to pursue truth while avoiding polarization. The soap opera technique of recapping each show at the start and advertising the next one produced a tiresome effect. The last program was the best; it hit hardest at the real weaknesses of the report. There is plenty of pay dirt for future inquiries, particularly into the roles of the FBI and CIA. After eighteen months of preparation and four hour-long shows, the CBS newsmen have earned a respite. They would neither be hunting devils nor clinging to illusions, however, if they kept the Warren Report on the hook.

—ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON.



"There is a hair in my espresso!"