

Oswald: from Minsk

IN one of the most bizarre pieces of television news footage filmed in the past few years, a senior CIA officer throws what would have to be regarded a tantrum in front of CBS news correspondent Daniel Schorr. The CIA man, giving blunt if undiplomatic expression to the Agency's line that excessive media coverage of their activities in Greece led to the death of their Athens chief-of-station, Richard Welch, hops up and down like a kid on a playground, yelling "Killer Schorr! Killer Schorr!" He then pushes Schorr into his cameraman, and we see trees, the sky, etc.

End of take. In the minds of the less vivid among us, the concept of the killer journalist is a little remote, occupying a mental space somewhat near that we have reserved for the killer bees.

Once in a while, however — somewhat the way the bees will occasion-



Lee Harvey Oswald on his arrival in Russia.

ally make a foray up north of the Pecos, the other concept crosses our mind.

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to Dallas?

No fewer than three of the subjects interviewed in Edward Jay Epstein's recent book, *Legend: the Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald* (Reader's Digest, \$12.95), died accidental or violent deaths within months of being interviewed by him. One important source, George De Mohrenschildt, was scheduled for our days of interviews with Epstein in Palm Beach. On the second day of interviews, De Mohrenschildt went home for lunch — and blew his brains out. Or perhaps we should say died, an apparent suicide — and put a little more weight on that word "apparent" than we usually do in this phrase. For

Epstein's subject in this book is the Kennedy assassination. His thesis: that Lee Harvey Oswald was a secret agent — of the Russians — and George De Mohrenschildt the man who controlled him.

On the face of it, Epstein is an unlikely and no doubt innocent candidate for killer journalist. As a relatively rare example of someone who has successfully managed to straddle the academic and journalistic worlds (he holds a recent Ph.D. in Government from Harvard), Epstein has been a credit to both. His last book, on the Drug Enforcement Agency, was based on old-fashioned good reporting — a technique apparently abandoned by social scientists in favor of less fruitful empirical methods — and was a refreshing change from the usual academic fluff written about government agencies.

At the same time, his often-unpopular essays on the media have

provided much-needed perspective on this self-serving establishment. Epstein's *Commentary* essay on "Did the Press Uncover Watergate?" is still the best formulation of the very real difference between investigative reporting and the transmission of information from investigative agencies. It is necessary reading for anyone who wants to bring their understanding of Watergate past the level of Woodward & Bernstein's *Hardy Boys* adventure.

Epstein's work on the media, however, has had one major flaw: he's never seen the close connection between established media and established institutions. From Epstein's new book, it is clear that he, too, has been absorbed. *Legend* is not a book that one gets the feeling was researched and written; rather, one gets the feeling it was produced and coordinated, and one also feels that it simply got out of Epstein's control.

The thesis of the Epstein book is simple: that Lee Harvey Oswald, assassin of John F. Kennedy, was somehow under instructions from the Soviet Union. The thesis of the Epstein book—that Oswald was a Russian agent — has to be distinguished from the factual material of the book itself. Indeed, the thesis, if you will, floats above the book, and rarely touches down to the actual text. The book is a promise that doesn't deliver: a headline in the *National Enquirer*.

Epstein's prime source for his thesis is James Jesus Angleton, a former CIA officer, once head of their counterin-

telligence (apt term) unit. Angleton has been quoted in the press as saying that he is "not a linear thinker." He bases his theory that Oswald was a Russian agent on the fact that, some months after the assassination, a defecting KGB officer, Yuri Ivanovich Nosenko, said he wasn't.

To Angleton's way of thinking, be it lateral, longitudinal, or what have you, this of course meant he was. Angleton's baroque logic is painstakingly reconstructed by Epstein and, like a house of cards, impossible to reproduce here. But it rests on one real assumption: that the Russians are



John Wayne (center) dining in the Marine mess hall on Corregidor. Oswald is circled by the doorway.

incapable of making mistakes, and that if they — or Oswald, after his defection — said or did anything, it had to be for a reason. There is a name for non-linear thinking of this sort. Most people call it *paranoia*.

If we dispel the Epstein thesis — and that, after reading the book, is a fair thing to do — we are left with two things, one provided intentionally by Epstein, the other provided quite unintentionally. What is intentional — and very much to be appreciated — is a tremendous amount of new material on Oswald's life. Epstein tracked down Oswald's Marine Corps buddies, childhood friends, and literally hundreds of others, many of them never interviewed before. He provides us with a fair summary of the results of that research.

But what results — and is no doubt unintentional — is a shockingly sympathetic portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald. The Kennedy era, as more of us now realize, was less a part of the

sixties than the tail-piece of the fifties. The Warren Commission and press of the time, when compelled to characterize Oswald, were trapped in the psychological categories of their era: Oswald was a kook, a loner, or — like the title of a Marilyn Monroe movie — a misfit.

Oswald was all of this. But in Oswald's conversations, as reconstructed by Epstein, there is another theme: a sort of double disgust with both the US and the USSR. The fact that people can speculate that Oswald was an agent of either the KGB or the CIA is possibly the best proof that he was a man without a country, a man unhappy with both bureaucratic socialism and self-righteous capitalism. Oswald did have a short flirtation with Cuba: it seemed to offer an alternative.

What does all this sound like? It sounds exactly like the mind-frame that led to the New Left (or, if we time its inception from the Port Huron statement, had already led to it, if it still had a long way to go to reach Dallas, Texas). This doesn't explain, of course, why Oswald went over the edge, and still doesn't account for the possibility of his being set up or used. But like it or not, the politics of Oswald's action fail to fit into conventional cold-war categories. Epstein and Angleton have unfortunately, for all their lateral thinking, been unable to step away from these categories.

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