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Oswald and Others?

REASONABLE DOUBT

An Investigation
into the Assassination
of John F. Kennedy.

By Henry Hurt.

Illustrated. 555 pp. New York:
Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
\$19.95.

By Adam Clymer

THIS is a compelling yet fundamentally calm analysis of the most important assassination in the United States since that of President Lincoln. More particularly, "Reasonable Doubt" examines the processes and findings of the official investigations conducted since Nov. 22, 1963, when John F. Kennedy was killed in Dallas.

For anyone who has not delved deeply into the immense literature on the subject, the book seems to demonstrate — the author contends the evidence is "overwhelming" — that Lee Harvey Oswald was a tool and probably a fall guy for some group of people who wanted Kennedy dead. But Henry Hurt has really done more of a job of showing that the case for Oswald as a lone assassin is flawed than of showing that Oswald was involved in a conspiracy.

Mr. Hurt, a reporter who spent four years on this project, seems persuasive in large measure because of the tone of the book. He argues that incompetence, self-protection and a sense that it was important to arrive at a conclusion within a few months caused deficiencies in the Warren Commission's investigation.

Unlike many of the flashier critics of years past, Mr. Hurt does not say the investigation itself was part of an assassination conspiracy. He writes convincingly that, rather than trying to cover up a conspiracy, "officials scurried either to demonstrate their efficiency or to conceal the deficiencies of their own agencies." Moreover, he concludes there was "an overwhelming concern, apparently genuinely

felt in most cases, that it was for the good of the country to get the whole awful business into the past as quickly as possible."

While Mr. Hurt has carefully examined the record and interviewed some people the official inquiries overlooked, he makes no claim to sensational revelations that solve the case. He has found one man, a psychotic drifter named Robert Easterling, who claims to have been involved with a group of conspirators who assassinated Kennedy. But Mr. Hurt does not take this

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source as a touchstone. Instead, he argues that Mr. Easterling's story ought to be given official attention.

Original research is not what commends this book. Mr. Hurt is at his best in listing the weaknesses of the investigations. For example, it is impossible to read his description of Kennedy's autopsy and the handling of its records and believe that it was all done properly.

For one who believes a conspiracy occurred, he does well not to adopt any of the competing theories. This is not a book designed to prove that the President was killed by the K.G.B., the C.I.A., Fidel Castro, anti-Castro Cubans, organized crime, all of the above or none of the above. At one time or another, someone has championed all these notions, but as Mr. Hurt observes after finding evidence to support

There are gaps
in all of the
assassination
theories.

some of them, they all have at least as many gaps as the one that has Oswald acting alone.

This sounds quite reasonable, but it leaves the confused picture pretty much where it was before. The official theory is widely disbelieved — some polls have found four out of five Americans do not believe Oswald acted by himself — but there is nothing solid or even likely to replace it. Mr. Hurt suggests the establishment of a permanent office in the Justice Department to track down and investigate new evidence and re-examine records, much like the office that pursues Nazi war criminals. He says little about how this office would overcome the obstacles that have thwarted other investigations. □