

THE SHOTS ARE STILL HEARD

Criticism of the Warren Commission's report on the assassination of PRESIDENT KENNEDY confronts PRESIDENT JOHNSON with a very delicate dilemma. Two books just published have clearly succeeded in undermining the faith of many people in the methods and conclusions of the commission. One, by MR. EDWARD JAY EPSTEIN, reveals flaws in the commission's procedures and suggests that there may have been another assassin besides OSWALD. The other, by MR. MARK LANE, questions whether OSWALD was guilty at all and hints strongly at a conspiracy involving the Dallas police.

When he set up the Warren Commission the PRESIDENT instructed it to "satisfy itself that the truth is known as far as it can be discovered". Implicit in these instructions was the need to satisfy others. It has not done so with sufficient conviction to dispel all doubts and all fears of plots and conspiracies.

Three main courses of action are open to the PRESIDENT. He can ignore the criticism and merely state his confidence in the commission. This would have the advantage of bolstering the commission's verdict, which also happens to be the most convenient politically. It can be argued that there is no need to invite complications. Nothing can undo the assassination. Seventy-five years from now the secret evidence will be released and historians will be able to have another go at the problem.

At the other extreme, the PRESIDENT could set up a new commission with instructions to start again at the beginning and take as much time as it needed. This would be a devastating gesture of no confidence in the CHIEF JUSTICE of the United States and all the other distinguished members of the commission. It would create a long period of extreme uncertainty and speculation.

A third possibility is to reconvene the Warren Commission with instructions to answer its critics and if necessary to re-examine some of the evidence. One danger of this would be that the commission might then be suspected of seek-

ing vindication rather than truth, but this could be partly averted by co-opting some new members. Another danger is that the critics would embroil the commission in a long and acrimonious argument. But it would cope with that.

A good deal depends on how far the critics have made their case. In particular, is there any evidence to suggest that the commission reached the wrong answer in saying that OSWALD was the sole assassin? Neither MR. LANE nor MR. EPSTEIN produces anyhing conclusive. MR. LANE raises some very interesting points, particularly about RUBY's relationship with the Dallas police, and the reliability of OSWALD's weapon. On the central point of the assassination, however, much of his work is extremely selective and does not survive a close check against the commission's report.

MR. EPSTEIN is more illuminating, for he has made a detailed study of how the commission worked. He has shown how many of the members did not have time to give proper attention to the investigation and how strong was the psychological pressure to reach the most reassuring conclusion. He shows the extent of disagreement among witnesses and investigators on certain crucial matters such as whether one bullet hit both PRESIDENT KENNEDY and GOVERNOR CONNALLY. If there were two bullets there must have been two assassins, for the victims were hit almost simultaneously. By sending the reader back to the report he also makes him aware how often the word "probably" occurs.

All things considered the Warren Commission did a remarkable job of work at a most difficult time under extreme pressure. It was confronted with enormous quantities of conflicting, unreliable, and often grotesque evidence. Though it admitted that on many points the whole truth could not be established, its main verdict has not been overturned. Nevertheless, it is now clear that it did cut some corners. There would be nothing shameful about going back to work and producing a supplementary report on the questions that have now been raised.