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MATTERS OF FACT, it has been observed, are very stubborn things. "The great tragedy of science," T. H. Huxley wrote, "is the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact." Because facts are not only exclusive but are rarely exposed except to buttress hypotheses to which the fact finder is already committed, it is difficult to assess exactly what Edward Jay Epstein has accomplished in **INQUEST: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth** (Viking). Ugly facts abound in this academic and chilling essay, facts presented in a manner to destroy much of the credibility of the commission's conclusions concerning the death of President Kennedy.

Although the lunatics were first in the field with their theories, leaving darker the waters already muddied by the Warren Commission, **INQUEST** is not the work of a nut. It is instead a tremendously impressive book, as fascinating to read as those classic English detective stories which worry so over train schedules and tidal calendars. Epstein's prose is antiseptic, his documentation as formidable as it is incomprehensible. This combination lends credence to his method, which is to take the facts available to the Commission—facts it ignored, suppressed or altered—to analyze them and arrive at the following arguments:

- The Commission's explicit mandate was to ascertain and expose the facts, but in truth it was more concerned with dispelling rumors (whether true or false) and with protecting the national interest.
- Members of the Commission were chosen more for their probity than their capacity to probe; they worked only part time, left the investigation to subordinates and, as one of their staff said, "had no idea what was happening."
- They were in such a hurry to complete their investigations and their report that they ignored much evidence of vital importance.
- They allowed the FBI to deny the rumor that Oswald was their paid informer without questioning the FBI's interest in such a denial.
- They insisted that the first bullet passed through Kennedy's neck and into Connally's body when all the evidence—including the FBI's autopsy, the only autopsy made, but, nevertheless, suppressed by the Commission—is against this theory. The Commission, Epstein implies, had to support this dubious theory or recognize the existence of a second assassin, since Oswald could not have fired twice fast

enough to wound both Kennedy and Connally.

- Evidence that a possible second assassin was on the scene "never reached the Commission."
- The quantity of FBI reports on the assassination may have had the unintended effect of obscuring relevant information.
- The Committee, in effect, merely recorded, but did not investigate, the evidence of the witnesses called before it.

The case Epstein builds up, with interviews, photographs and documents inexplicably withheld by the Commission—though they were presented to it—is compelling. He does not digress into his own theories. He does not offer "facts" known only to him or interviews which only he conducted. He draws no spectacular conclusions from his arguments, though the reader may draw some. Taking everything Epstein puts forth at its least possible value, one cannot avoid the conclusion that the Commission behaved in a sloppy, irresponsible and less than candid manner.

IN QUESTIONING the way a commission established by the Government handled a delicate matter of public interest Epstein necessarily left many questions unanswered, but he did not leave any unasked. As much cannot be said for Richard N. Goodwin in his flaccid and pretentiously titled book **TRIUMPH OR TRAGEDY: Reflections on Vietnam** (Random House). Goodwin seeks to trace the reasons why we are involved in the Vietnamese war, the steps that have led us to the position we are now in, and the steps which might possibly lead us out. We have, he says, "a compelling case" for staying in, because if we leave now, we will damage the confidence of Asian nations, perhaps of all nations, in our military effectiveness. "Withdrawal [is] intolerable until we achieve a resolution that does not involve American defeat."

Our interest, he goes on to say, is not to guarantee South Vietnam forever from a Communist takeover, but to show that once we have committed our military power, we cannot be driven from the battlefield. We should work for a ceasefire, free elections (with Communist participation), rapport between Hanoi and Washington on a high official level.

Nothing new here. Nothing even of much interest. Such questions as why America cannot stand a defeat of this sort, why Communist domination would prove worse for the Vietnamese than the attrition of this war, why so many Americans should die for this particular posture of our Government, why we have a right to keep on intervening in a conflict which is in part a civil war, and how we can stop making the war worse with every new effort on our part never occur to him.

SOME spy novels convince us that the author knows what spying is all about; others, like Noel Behn's **THE KREMLIN LETTER** (Simon & Schuster) convince us only that the author has read a lot of spy novels. Behn's debt to Fleming, Le Carré, Deighton and others is woefully apparent in this stupid story about a whole team of independent operatives loose in Moscow, mixing whores, heroin and ingenious bugging devices as they tangle with the KGB. Read it at one sitting and you may possibly make sense of all the characters and deliberately obscured actions, but otherwise it will seem like little more than a lot of tedious huffing and puffing.

—PETER S. PRESCOTT