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Droney Taken To Task

A Reader's Rebuttal On Epstein Book

By JIM DRONEY

Once in a rare time there is a literate letter that travels far beyond the usual, and such a one is this.

It concerns a column on the Epstein book on the Warren Commission Report which appeared here back a bit, but other commitments prevented its publication until now.

From Mrs. Eugene (Jane F.) Burlingame of Wellesley came this:

Dear Mr. Droney:

"I'm sure you'll be a millionaire after winning suit against the person who wrote under your byline in tonight's paper. One has only to review your columns of the past few years to realize this is the work of an enemy imposter.

"So that you don't toss this in the wastebasket, let me quickly establish myself as a reader of excellent taste and judgment—I am a regular reader and an admirer of yours! (Flattery will get you everywhere).

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"AFTER READING your criticism of Mr. Epstein's book, which I have read, I am at a loss to understand how you could have written it. (That old devil syntax, Mrs. B.). I believe the theory advanced by those in the field of psychology—that the vast majority of people must have a tidy explanation for that awful day in November — is a valid one. There is comfort or assurance in believing that the whole nightmare could occur because of a strange and tragic set of circumstances rather than because of cold deliberate plotting.

"But, you are not of the vast majority — you are a man of unusual talent. Your writing has warmth and even great emotion at times but always the most important ingredient—objectivity.

"You have condemned Edward Epstein by associating him with Mark Lane. I find fault with Mr. Lane because his kind of raving makes me uncomfortable and I think he exaggerates in order to convince people that what he says, and believes, is true. Just because Edward Epstein questions, or finds fault with, some of the same things doesn't mean that he should be thrown into the same pot. You mention Mr. Lane's profits from lectures and the pot of gold he will soon collect from his book —

this is fair criticism if you feel he is exploiting the situation. I happen to disapprove of the man but if he has a message and has a nation to convince, then he has a right to earn a living as he proceeds in his flamboyant style.

"On the other hand, to accuse — and that's what you really did — Mr. Epstein of being motivated by the possibility of financial gain because Mark Lane has found it profitable is unfair unless you have information which you didn't set forth in your column.

"MY LAST SENTENCE" sounds a little ragtime, but I'm too tired to start again. What I meant was that you ascribed this improper motive to Mr. Epstein on his own merit but you connected it with Mr. Lane and even forgave him (Lane) a bit while finding Epstein all the more guilty because he is a scholar and has disillusioned us.

"You say a MAJOR CLAIM of Mr. Epstein is that there were two assassins. You couldn't be more wrong — I really feel you didn't read the book but took someone's word about it. Mr. Epstein says that the proof of one assassin offered by the Warren Commission is contradictory in part; that their theory may be correct but that they did not pursue those contradictions but wrapped them in nice little packages and threw them away, and that this was not the purpose they should serve—to serve up a national bromide.

"The one real point you took issue with is ridiculous. You selected an irrelevancy as a point of attack. Mr. Rowland is mentioned three times in the book (pp 70-71, 91-92, 109). All of the reference to him could have been left out without diminishing the impact of "Inquest." Even Mr. Epstein questioned his veracity. If he were trying to make a real case for the existence of two assassins on his 'evidence', he would hardly have included

Mr. Rowland, since, if you accept the premise, you have to place the other assassin somewhere other than the Book Depository.

"Mr. Epstein has written a sober, almost reluctant, evaluation of the Warren Commission's effort. I think he went to great lengths to explain and excuse their obvious deficiencies; and has raised some very provocative questions which deserve an investigation.

"At the risk of sounding harsh, I must say what you have written resembles a character assassination which has a 'hollow ring' and warrants strong condemnation. You have leveled damaging charges and attempted to discredit the integrity and reputation of a young man who has dared to ask reasonable questions in this crazy era of 'not rocking the boat.' I know these are attributes you despise and hope you will give the book a careful reading before you join the 'comfortable' people. President Kennedy is dead, no matter how it came about, but people like you, honest, concerned and important contributors to this strange society are very rare and we can't afford to let you let us down."

FOR THE PROFUSIVE PRAISE, a thanks that must be hesitant because a sugar coating never lessened the lethality of a cyanide pill, and for the criticism, a reply that must, for reasons of space, be delayed.

But a few minor points in parting:

Mr. Epstein was attacked as a rotten reporter who'd be fired by any city editor and as a noody-noddy adjunct to the company of scholars to which he aspires.

Fortunately, as with many of his kind, he is a writer of massive mediocrity, which is probably the reason his book is a matching success.