

12/25/66

A New Inquiry Is Needed

By HERBERT MITGANG

AFTER the assassination, two Texas newspapers—one in Dallas, the other in Houston—spoke approvingly of the deed and mocked the slain President.

The Dallas Herald said: "God Almighty ordered this event or it could never have taken place."

The Houston Telegraph said: "What sacrifices, by flame and sword, by insult, confiscation, exile and death, and by all the wrongs which make oppression bitter, shall be required of us as the expiation, we know not. All of them we defy."

There was no question about who had pulled the trigger. The questions arose afterward. . . .

Was there a small conspiracy or a large one that reached into the highest quarters of the Administration in Washington?

Why was the assassin himself killed when he was surrounded by police and soldiers? To silence him forever?

Was the assassin killed by a carbine bullet—as the assassin's alleged killer claimed—or by a pistol bullet—as the autopsy revealed?

Why was the assassin's "second man" allowed to get away across the border? And why, when evidence of his whereabouts was disclosed, did high persons in Washington prefer that no news about this man get out to the general public?

Why did a member of the Cabinet forbid pictures of the slain President and order all photographic evidence—except his own—destroyed?

Was a cover-up ordered by a Cabinet member that allowed accomplices before and after the fact of assassination to get away with murder?

If so, was the cover-up made necessary because of a need to present a united front in the eyes of foreign nations?

Did the plot to kill the President originate with Irish Catholics? With the Jesuits? Even the Pope himself?

Because of the assassin's final words, why wasn't his mother fully questioned about the deed?

Why were advertisements allowed that tipped off the assassin about the exact time and place where the President would be?

Why was the seating arrangement of those supposed to be near the President changed?

Why did certain persons invited to be with the President at the time of the assassination suddenly find they had to be elsewhere?

Why was the President's own choice of a bodyguard at the time of the assassination ignored for feeble reasons? And why was the neglectful substitute bodyguard—a heavy drinker who often wound up in houses of prostitution—neither examined nor reprimanded for misconduct?

Was it indeed true that Vice President Johnson and the assassin knew each other? If not, why did the assassin pen a personal note to the Vice President on the very day of the assassination?

Why was the assassin's diary suppressed? And why, when it was at last revealed, were 18 pages cut out?

Why was the only possible path for the assassin to take left open? Why were those responsible for allowing the assassin to get away at first not questioned and prosecuted?

WHY was the assassin's alleged killer—an eccentric with a sex problem—made into a hero instead of being punished without delay?

Why were all suspects known to be intimates of the assassin removed from the scene?

What conflicts and rivalries existed between the city and Federal police? Why was one lax, the other vigorous, and neither willing to complain about official negligence?

Was it a fact that a Congressional committee secretly started an inquiry to determine if the new President had a hand in the murder of his predecessor?

Why was the chief justice of the District of Columbia placed in the position of having to take testimony immediately after the assassination?

Had the first shot fired by the assassin at the President misfired, would he have had enough time to get off a second shot?

Why, when the assassin was reburied, did rumors start that the man who was shot was not actually the assassin?

Why was another gunman assigned to kill Vice President Johnson? Why did he lose his nerve?

As for the commission of nine men picked to sift the evidence and try the guilty, why were they named and others far more qualified excluded?

Why did this hand-picked commission act in concert with the prosecutors and Federal police—the very police who had blundered by failing to protect the President and then compounded their ineptitude by allowing the assassin to be killed before their eyes?

Why did this commission have its signals called by a key member of the slain President's—and then the new President's—Cabinet?

Why did the commission conduct all its evidential procedures along military lines, including the right to convict by two-thirds vote instead of unanimously? Indeed, why was this commission both judge and jury?

Since the commission had Presidential authority to investigate any persons and evidence involved in the conspiracy, why were many documents altered or overlooked?

Was the commission's rush job the result of pressure to silence critics, reap a whirlwind of revenge for the death of a beloved President, or for the nefarious aim of entrenching the new leadership in Washington?

Why were books and souvenirs of the assassination and commission inquiry manufactured and printed almost as soon as the President was buried—was the aim to seek profit or the truth?

Why, when the case was officially closed in Washington, would it not stay closed?

TO put a bullet into the head of a President of the United States—is there (in words this assassin had often declaimed) “method in ’t”—a conspiracy? Or is it (as Pascal wrote in his “Pensées”) that at times in history “men are mad so unavoidably that not to be mad would constitute one a madman of another order of madness”?

We know not for certain to this day: though all of the above questions were raised then, or have been raised in our own time, about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

HERBERT MITGANG, formerly of The Times editorial board, is executive editor of C.B.S. News.

THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE

Dec 25, 1966