

Books of The Times

Rush to the Warren Committee Report

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

RUSH TO JUDGMENT: A Critique of the Warren Commission's Inquiry into the Murders of President John F. Kennedy, Officer J. D. Tippit and Lee Harvey Oswald. By Mark Lane. 478 pages. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston. \$5.95.

THE OSWALD AFFAIR: An Examination of Contradictions and Omissions of the Warren Report. By Leo Sauvage. 418 pages. World. \$6.95.

BECAUSE of the extraordinary legal circumstances attending the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, an extraordinary legal body, the Warren Commission, was created to perform in effect all the functions of establishing legal truth. Normally in the American judicial system these functions include investigation, indictment, prosecution, defense and judgment.

There is a growing body of opinion that the Warren Commission was handicapped by its uniqueness and homogeneity, and therefore did not perform all its functions.

Mark Lane, one of the most strident of the voices critical of the commission, contends in his book, "Rush to Judgment," that the commission

skipped the fundamental question raised the moment shots rang out in Dallas, which was "What happened?" and leaped by questionable logic to subsidiary ones: Did Lee Harvey Oswald shoot the President and did he act alone? Then, operating from the premise that he did both, the commission proceeded to gather the evidence that supported this conclusion, even twisting it when it proved uncooperative, and ignored that which seemed downright contradictory.

Defense Omitted

To document his arguments Lane reviews and attacks the commission's proceedings as contained in its report and the 26 volumes of testimony and exhibits. In addition, he presents evidence based on his own investigations, which were carried on since he accepted, in December, 1963, the invitation of Marguerite Oswald to represent her son's interests before the Warren Commission.

To read "Rush to Judgment" without the commission's 27 volumes at hand is a staggering experience. If we are to believe Lane, the evidence against Oswald is flimsier, the task of discovering who fired the deadly shots more bewildering.

But while "Rush to Judgment" is an eloquent summary of the defense, it cannot be read as a logically airtight critique. Like any summary, it is filled with stresses and biases. For example, in challenging the commission's conclusion that the ammunition Oswald allegedly used was sufficiently reliable, Lane quotes from the "Speculations and Rumors" section of the report as follows:

"*Speculation*—Ammunition for rifle found on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book

Depository had not been manufactured since the end of World War II. The ammunition used by Oswald must, therefore, have been at least 20 years old, making it extremely unreliable.

Commission finding—The ammunition used in the rifle recently made by the Western Cartridge Company [East Alton, Illinois], which manufactures such ammunition currently."

False, says Lane, presenting a letter from the manufacturer stating that 6.5-millimeter Mannlicher-Carcano ammunition has not been made by them since 1944, and concluding, therefore, that the commission was wrong about the ammunition's reliability. What Lane neglects to include are, first, the commission's conclusion that the ammunition, whenever it was manufactured, is in plentiful supply and, second, the final sentence in the "*Commission finding*": "In tests with the same kind of ammunition, experts fired Oswald's Mannlicher-Carcano rifle more than 100 times without misfire."

This does not necessarily dispel the disturbing questions he raises concerning the number of bullets fired, the direction of their flight, the weapon which fired them, the whereabouts of Oswald—and for that matter Jack Ruby—before, during and immediately after the assassination, and the selection and interviewing of witnesses.

These questions have been raised by others, among them Léo Sauvage, the American correspondent of *Le Figaro*, in his more dispassionate but equally critical book, "The Oswald Affair."

But it is the very bias and shrillness of "Rush to Judgment," its power to send one scrambling through the 27 volumes for protection, that comprises its effectiveness. For it presents Mark Lane as Lee Harvey Oswald's advocate, crying to be let in to defend his underdog and thereby join a not altogether disreputable tradition in American history. And it makes one suspect that had the membership of the commission allowed Lane—or someone as single-mindedly committed to Oswald's defense—to function in the hearings, its proceedings would have more completely reflected the American judicial system, and thereby reached, if not a different conclusion, one that would not have inspired such books as "Rush to Judgment."



Fred W. McDarrab
Mark Lane