

Books of The Times

Pandora's Box

By ELIOT FREMONT-SMITH

INQUEST: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth. By Edward Jay Epstein. Introduction by Richard H. Rovere. 224 pages. Viking. \$5.

FROM its Presidential appointment one week after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas to the completion of a report of its findings 10 months later, the Warren Commission (formally, the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy, headed by Chief Justice of the United States, Earl Warren) had two obvious purposes or duties to perform. One was explicit—to ascertain, evaluate and expose the facts. The other was implicit—to protect the national interest by dispelling rumors. These were compatible, Edward Jay Epstein writes, "so long as the damaging rumors were untrue," adding: "But what if a rumor damaging to the national interest proved to be true? The commission's explicit purpose would dictate that the information be exposed regardless of the consequences, while the commission's implicit purpose would dictate that the rumor be dispelled regardless of the fact that it was true. In a conflict of this sort, one of the commission's purposes would emerge as dominant."



Sandy Noves

Edward Jay Epstein

This is the main thesis of a most interesting and disturbing study that has caused considerable stir. It is probably fair to say that "Inquest" is the first book to throw open to serious question, in the minds of thinking people, the findings of the Warren Commission. It does so not as an outraged polemic, convincing only to the already convinced, but as a sober, scholarly case study of how an extraordinary government commission goes about its work—the conception of its job, the nature of internal and external pressures on such a commission and the effect these may have on the conduct and quality of the investigation, selection and evaluation of evidence.

At the outset, Mr. Epstein specifically rejects the underlying assumption of governmental omnipotence—that the Government can do whatever it sets out to do—that has been common to most previous writing on the assassination, both demonological and blindly faithful.

Instead, Mr. Epstein persuasively argues, if the commission failed in its primary, explicit purpose, the disinterested, exhaustive search for truth—and in certain crucial respects he believes it did fail—it was because the commission allowed its second, implicit purpose, the allaying of harmful and divisive rumors, to take precedence. The very nature of the commission and its investigators (eminent, and therefore involved with other

duties and commitments), the hurried circumstances under which it worked (Mr. Epstein documents immense pressures to complete the report and get it out before the elections) and the expectations the country had of it (for a logical solution, without loose ends, without gnawing doubts), all militated, Mr. Epstein says, not for the establishment of actual and probably imperfect truth, but for the establishment of something quite different, "political truth."

The major political truth that most of us accepted as simple truth, and which this book soberly challenges, is that the evidence points to Lee Harvey Oswald as the sole assassin. According to Mr. Epstein, the evidence points to no such thing. It points instead to considerable confusion about how many bullets were fired, the strong possibility that there was another assassin (Oswald's guilt is not doubted, only that he acted alone) and to possible, though not necessarily malicious, tampering with the autopsy report. All of this is debatable; indeed, applying the author's lesson, one may question his unqualified allegiance to unvarnished truth. To what extent was Mr. Epstein predisposed to prove a case that the Warren Commission, for the reasons above, could not succeed in its primary function? One may also note that the unlikely, even the seemingly impossible, has in the past occasionally turned out to be true, or as near to "true" as we can get.

Yet Mr. Epstein's book is at least persuasive in showing that if the Warren Commission's version of the assassination is correct, it is not completely faithful to the evidence—which includes unexplained contradictions and unevaluated doubts—that the commission had available to it. And, backed with interviews with commission members and its staff, and research in Government archives (the investigative job, Richard Rovere, in a powerful introduction, suggests newspaper reporters should have done when the commission first issued its report), the book is also persuasive in its examination of how such a thing could happen.

In short, "Inquest" represents what must now be termed a new and preliminary investigation into the assassination of President Kennedy—an investigation, it should be realized, that may never yield a fully satisfactory solution. A Pandora's box, perhaps, but there it is—it has been opened.