

21 July 1966

Dear Mr. Stamm,

You know that for me the WR did not need to be shot down, because I never accepted it for one moment. In my unpublished book, I spend some 15 pages of introduction on an examination of reactions to the WR when it was first published, especially the appalling position taken by such luminaries of the "Liberal" Establishment as I.F. Stone, etc., and the contrasting courage, energy, and unwillingness to compromise of the critics (Salandria, Sauvage, etc.). By no means do I ignore their contribution, nor in fact my own contribution. All of us were working from the outside-in, so to speak, relying on published material from which we made inferences and deductions and arguments which long ago effectively demolished the WR and its authors. The trouble was, we demolished it for each other and with each other, without having any perceptible effect on public opinion.

Epstein, in some ways the least industrious and knowledgeable of the researchers, had access to information which otherwise would never have come to light, largely thanks to Liebeler. When I wrote that he shot down the WR, it was in the context of press and public debate, which is in fact now raging. His book, with all its limitations, is draped and smothered in respectability, with a seal of approval (Rovere@s) that virtually guaranteed wide debate. Judging even from the incomplete samplings which I have been receiving from my press clipping service, the book has really brought about an important modification in the status of the Warren Report, ranging from such qualified changes of heart as that publicly confessed by Max Lerner to categorical expressions of shock and conviction that the WR is not to be believed, and editorial demands that the government answer Epstein's charges.

These manifestations are, in my opinion, the beginning of a new phase, in which people like Harold Weisberg, Salandria, etc. will get a hearing, and in which new books, perhaps my own included, have some prospects at least of attention. Furthermore, the book has provoked a sense of urgency about uncovering more evidence against the Commission; and, as you may know already, Paul Hoch and Vince Salandria turned up two new documents in the Archives which are of crucial importance--the Secret Service report no. 767 on Hudkins and Sweatt, which exposes the malice and dishonesty of Fletcher Knebel's attack on Inquest; and, far more important, the report of FBI agents Sibert and O'Neill on the autopsy which they observed, written with obvious care, precision, and detail, and stipulating that the wound was below the shoulders, penetrated only a short distance, and had no exit. The FBI is now saying (not for attribution) that their Summary and Supplemental Reports WERE CORRECT. Six months ago I would not have believed that we could have made such inroads so quickly. Macdonald, by the way, also seems to have been converted by Inquest, and more definitely than Lerner, judging from a letter I received from him recently.

Incidentally, Epstein will have an article in a forthcoming issue of Esquire in which he will, I believe, deal with the 313 head shot.

I hope that you read the whole of my review, not just the shooting-down sentence, and that you would agree that I clearly disassociated myself from Epstein's conclusions and stated my own. I did not attack him, nor even have the impulse to attack him, because it seems to me that the new evidence that he presented speaks for itself, loudly and clearly, regardless of his misguided concessions to the Commission and its conclusions. In fact, I know from my first contacts with Epstein that he genuinely believed--at that time, at least--some of the notions which I consider rather ridiculous (Oswald's implication, the Commission's "innocence," etc.). That he said the silly things he said seems to me not to warrant the veritable storm of rage and recrimination that has boiled up within our own group. Some critics have taken such a violent stand against Epstein that one of them, for example, refused to make available a chart he had made if it was intended for Epstein's use (the same person, I might add, took a less moralizing position in another situation involving the use of dirty pool by Ramparts in an attempt to steal findings committed to another publication). (And the same ragers-and-ranters against Epstein are strangely unconcerned and silent about Mark Lane's gross falsehoods and inventions, in his now-frantic campaign for credit and priority with respect to the FBI Summary Report--he is claiming in a widely-circulated brochure that he is the first to publish it, notwithstanding Salandria's article in TMO April 1966 or Ed's book.)

No, I do not think that the work of all of Epstein's predecessors was to no avail: but I do think that thanks to Epstein's book their work now has a forum which it did not have before, not because it lacked merit but because they could not get a hearing. Sauvage feels, for example, that Inquest has helped the prospects of his own book (American edition) immeasurably. Because the WR is no longer "untouchable" we have a greatly brighter chance of getting at the truth, in our lifetimes, and maybe quite soon.

I think Epstein made a fundamental and terrible error, and I have told him so, in accepting the validity of the "hard evidence" even after he himself had demonstrated that one crucial item of that hard evidence, the autopsy findings, were suspect and almost certainly altered. I believe that his assumption that the FBI had the autopsy report before its own 12/9/63 and 1/13/64 Reports were written was reasonable and supported by a certain amount of evidence, Adams' recantation (which I think is a pure lie) notwithstanding. Anyhow, Knebel has now supplied the date of 12/23/63 for the transmittal of the autopsy report to the FBI. I don't take that as gospel, since I believe they actually had the report or the equivalent much earlier. But even if the 12/23/63 date is valid, it leaves to be explained that three weeks later the FBI wrote its Supplemental Report in which it gave a description of the wound which conflicts completely with the supposed contents of that autopsy report. Not one spokesman for the Commission has been able to explain how that came about; and although the press has reported that the FBI admits that its own Reports were inaccurate, the FBI has said within the last few days that they were NOT inaccurate but a reliable account of what the doctors actually said. All this must still be brought into public discussion; and that is in fact in the works right now. (I would agree with you, by the way, that the original autopsy report might have been false, for the reasons you state, which means that the actual findings made during the post-mortem on 11/22/63 were altered in the writing of the report on 11/24/63; but that would leave unexplained not only the FBI reports of 12/9/63 and 1/13/64 but also the Secret Service reenactment of 12/5/63, to find out how the President was shot in the front from behind; and many other contradictions of that type.)

(V) and the editorial in the same issue
with which I agree

I think that Epstein's expose of the Commission's internal strife is of cardinal importance but I don't believe that his documentation is meager. In fact, what could he produce other than accounts of verbal statements made to him (none of which, except for Adams', has even been denied by those concerned), since most of the dissension was merely verbal? The one paramount exception--the Liebeler memorandum--is discussed at some length; I would have liked to see the whole of it published, but maybe Epstein is saving that, and other material, for a second round, and a third, etc.

Frankly, I don't like to be placed in the position of defending Epstein's book. Personally I did not like his "blind faith" and "demonologists" classification; it was one of the things I tried to get him to change, before publication; in fact, I wrote about ten or more pages of suggested changes, some of which he made. It was hardly satisfaction to be told after the book was out that he was sorry he had not made some of the other suggested changes, which he realized belatedly were correct and necessary. But I return to what seems to me to be the central issue about the flaws in Inquest--they have to be seen in proportion to its positive contribution, which I continue to believe is enormous and crucial.

It is a satisfaction, however, to see that little by little Epstein is moving closer to the position that you and I and our colleagues take, more easily take, I suspect, because of our longer experience and anti-Establishment orientation. I don't mean that youth alone excuses fundamental intellectual compromises or evasions; it is only a footnote to such malfesancies. But Epstein has given us a "hand" and given it with apparently genuine conviction, wrong though it is; and I think we could all better use our time in using that hand to belabor the real culprits and their phony Report than in berating Epstein for not having given us the whole arm.

Since I am baring my thoughts, I might as well confess that I did wonder if you were not losing interest in the case or perhaps silently disassociating yourself from points of view that you found inimical. I am glad that that is not the situation, but I am sorry to learn that you have been handicapped by illness. I hope things will look up. I too feel a sometimes-unbearable exhaustion, yet, I don't know any more how to rest or how to think of subjects other than this one. Why don't you try to come down and visit me, so we can talk in a leisurely way, and I can show you some of the press clippings and other stuff which has accumulated. I expect to start my vacation in about a week and I have no plans yet to be away from home. Perhaps we can have an afternoon together. Incidentally, remind me if you can manage to come down to show you a letter of complaint received from General Walker, who has found time to look at my Subject Index. (Be sure to see the current NY Review of Books, by the way, cover story on the WR.)

With apologies for the incoherence of this reply, and for the omission of any points which I may have overlooked.

Sincerely,

P.S. I think it is time you addressed me by my first name alone.

*P.P.S. Corresponding to Jacob Cohen (up to no good)
H. Y. Fisher on August 5 7/23/64 6-1*