



Max Lerner

Dallas Again

Four years after Kennedy's assassination add the name of a Haverford professor of philosophy, Josiah Thompson, to the list of those who have shaken the public confidence in the Warren Commission Report, and place that light on top of the hat. He has worked hard on a "micro-study" of any bit of evidence bearing on the killing, as if he were a one-man new Warren Commission, re-investigating the greatest mystery of our time, digging up everything as "a task in archeology." He has written a book—"Six Seconds in Dallas"—with a Saturday Evening Post preview of it.

His conclusion is that it is still a mystery; that the President's limousine was caught in a carefully prepared trap; that there were four bullets fired by three gunmen stationed at different points; that one of them, stationed in the Texas Book Depository (who may not have been Oswald) fired the first and third shots, both hitting the President; that a second gunman, firing from a rooftop of a Houston St. building, hit Gov. Connally; that a third, hidden behind a stockade fence in front of the limousine, fired the last shot, which rocked the President's head back and finished him.

If this "reconstruction" of the killing is valid (Thompson himself leaves to the future to decide whether it is "history, semi-history, or fiction"), then at least two of the three gunmen made their getaway safely and are still at large among us. He refuses to speculate on who they may have been or what their motives were, and contents himself with a scrupulous sifting of the evidence of the killing itself.

What about Oswald? Thompson joins the growing list of students who believe that Oswald did not fire a shot, although he agrees there is no proof of this and that he may be wrong. His theory is that there was one other man, or possibly two, in that sixth-floor window of the Book Depository who used the gun that was fired and left behind, and that they got away through an unguarded back door.

This seems to me the weakest part of his reconstruction, and the most conjectural. Although the case against Oswald as sole assassin has loopholes in it, the case for leaving him out of it entirely has just as many. I suspect we shall have to leave him in it until we get other and better evidence. If even, not only because (as Dr. David Abrahamson contends in a learned paper published by the N. Y. Academy of Medicine) there was a finess for the crime in his life history and personality structure, but because we have to torture too much of what is known in order to support the necessary alternative theory of Oswald as dupe and patsy as well as innocent.

The strongest part of the Thompson book lies in his disproof of the theory that a single bullet passed through both Connally and Kennedy, and his massing of evidence for the theory of the four bullets and the three directions from which they came. From now on anyone wanting to support the single-killer theory, with its accompanying position on the fascinating double-duty bullet, will have to disprove Thompson's reading of the evidence, which on those issues is more careful and more powerful than the Warren Report.

Like others I have gone through several phases of belief in the Kennedy killing. I reacted strongly at first against any conspiracy theory, whether of the far-out Left or the far-out Right, and thought the Warren Report explained enough to be tolerably acceptable. The first book that shook me up was Edward Epstein's "Inquest," which showed how sloppily and heartily the commission had reached its conclusions. When Jim Garrison threw his New Orleans bombshell I went down to see what he had and for a moment was fascinated by it, but while I have not closed my mind to his theory it strikes me as wilder than facilitated by any base of evidence he can produce. (I shall discuss Harold Weisberg's new book, "Oswald in New Orleans," in another piece.) It was not until Thompson's book that I became clear in my mind about some kind of collaborative shooting, and about the trap that had been set for the President.

The American universities, which have had to take some rough treatment recently, can point to some decidedly non-ivory tower books on the Warren Report. Epstein did his book as a graduate student thesis at Cornell, Richard Popkin, author of "The Second Oswald," is a philosophy professor at UCLA, while Thompson, a Ph.D. recently out of Yale, is teaching philosophy at Haverford and has a new book on Kierkegaard.

Evidently a few sturdy minds survive even the kind of graduate school fare we now dish out to them, or perhaps they even thrive on it. Maybe Thompson will leave Kierkegaard alone for a while, and turn to the big problem remaining in the assassination: who were the three men, where did they come from, what plot did they form, by what strange drives were they moved?