

BOOKS

A legend in his own time

Who was Lee Oswald?

by David Williams

LEGEND: THE SECRET WORLD OF LEE HARVEY OSWALD by Edward Jay Epstein. Reader's Digest Press/McGraw-Hill; 384 pp. \$12.95.

Was Lee Harvey Oswald a spy? And if so, for whom? Edward Jay Epstein, author of *Inquest* (a critical examination of the Warren Commission), raises these questions in his new book. His findings add controversial fuel to the already heated debate on two important contemporary issues: the intelligence of our intelligence agencies and the unanswered questions regarding the assassination of John Kennedy. But his conclusions have serious flaws.

The problem with Epstein's treatment of Oswald is evident in his very first sentence. In the preface, he tells us that *Legend* "is about Lee Harvey Oswald and his relations with the intelligence services of three nations." Would that it were so. In fact, the book is about Oswald and one intelligence agency — the KGB.

Long troubled by Oswald's

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1959 defection to the Soviet Union, Epstein, aided by considerable financial support from *Reader's Digest*, tried to determine why a 20-year-old Marine would leave family and friends for Russia. The answer he suggests is that while Oswald was stationed in Japan with the Marines, he was recruited by the KGB to provide information about the U-2 spy plane. Oswald's "defection," just before the downing of Francis Gary Powers's U-2 in April, 1960, followed some two years later by Oswald's return to the US with a Russian wife in tow, looks highly suspicious to Epstein. He points to Oswald's involvement with George De Mohrenschildt, an enigma with ties to several intelligence agencies; he points to Oswald's alleged 1963 excursion to Mexico City, where he supposedly visited the Cuban and Russian embassies and, according to Epstein, contacted a known KGB operative. Arguing that Oswald was too easily identifiable as KGB for the Soviets even to contemplate using him as an assassin, Epstein refrains from implicating the Russians in the events of Dallas; but the writer does claim that the KGB was responsible for some subsequent occurrences.

The book begins with the January 1964, defection of KGB agent Yuri Nosenko, who assures his American interrogators that Oswald never worked for the KGB. His story is corroborated by one of J. Edgar Hoover's favorite sources, a Soviet double-agent code-named "Fedora" (the latest defector from the Soviet Union has once again put "Fedora's" reliability in question). When some of this "corroborated" story fails to check out, the intelligence community splits over Nosenko's credibility. James Angleton, then chief of CIA counter-intelligence and now one of Epstein's prime sources, becomes convinced that Nosenko had been sent by the KGB to deliver an Oswald "legend," or false biography, to the CIA, the FBI and the Warren Commission. With the 1974 resignations of Angleton and his top assistants — a purge, according to *Legend* — the pro-Nosenko faction wins the argument and, in 1976, Nosenko is pronounced a legitimate defector and brought into the agency — for which he still works.

To Angleton and his associates, it's all a "travesty" that "throws the entire perspective about Soviet intelligence out of focus." These are serious charges, and they will, as other reviewers have noted, rekindle debate on Capitol Hill over intelligence estimates of Soviet strategic capability — among other things. But how are average Americans — even those of us who try to keep abreast of such matters — to evaluate Epstein's arguments? His unsettling thesis — that our intelligence agencies have been penetrated by Soviet "moles" dis-bursing "disinformation" — is certain to inspire some good ol' Cold War paranoia. What we need to know is, how good is his thesis?

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In his previous book, *Agency of Fear*, Epstein discussed some of the problems inherent in investigative journalism and concluded, "Because the circumstances surrounding each interview bear directly on the credibility of the interviews . . . I have decided to reveal all the sources for this book and comment on the motives, problems, contradictions and gaps." It's too bad he didn't do the same for *Legend*. When he passed through Boston recently, I asked him about this; he agreed that it was indeed an oversight. "I think I will write a long appendix on the sources," he told me. "Anything done to obscure a source makes it impossible to read or to check on it or understand the position. Especially in this — you have to get the Angleton viewpoint, the Colby viewpoint, the Helms viewpoint . . . It's not a question of Angleton being honest or dishonest, but he'll tell you one-thirtieth of what there is to know — which is a way of being dishonest. You don't have to lie — you just tell a person part of the story." Which is just what Epstein has done in *Legend*.

The book never confronts the role of US intelligence agencies in the life of Lee Harvey Oswald. Much of the evidence used to link Oswald to the KGB can also be used to link him to the CIA. Epstein himself makes the argument — without acknowledging its implications: "In the many-connected world of intelligence," he writes, "it is not possible to determine under whose control an agent is working simply by identifying other agents with whom he is associating." There is much evidence to suggest that Oswald was indeed an intelligence operative; but was he working for our side, their side,

or both?

Epstein acknowledged in our interview that some of the evidence suggests that Oswald had ties to US intelligence after his return from Russia. And there are some ex-intelligence officers who have argued that Oswald's "recruitment" by the KGB in Japan is unlikely, since he had no information that they didn't already possess. Readers should be warned that *Legend's* evidence is presented in a coy — and sometimes deceiving — way. For example, Epstein makes much of the revelation that Oswald's Russian "diary" wasn't written until he'd returned to the US. But a reading of the diary makes this clear enough — Oswald made no effort to make it seem contemporary.

Moreover, Epstein's Appendix A, a summary of the so-called "Status of the Evidence," is so full of errors that it brings into serious question everything that precedes it. Those of us who have studied the Kennedy case have long argued that any understanding must begin with the actual shooting. Many believe that there was no lone gunman named Oswald firing in Dallas — and Epstein once agreed with this. "It seemed," he told me, "when the Warren Report came out, that one person could not have accounted for all the shots. I still think it is unlikely," he said, adding that he doesn't believe we'll ever know for sure. Yet nothing in the book suggests that Epstein has any doubts on this score — although clearly, such doubts would be crucial to the book. Epstein even cites an article by Dr. Cyril Wecht — without mentioning that the article posits two assassins, not one. Such sloppiness undermines Epstein's overall thesis, whatever its actual merits.

Basically, the book is a brief for Angleton — with little or no rebuttal. And though many who'd ordinarily disagree with Angleton find themselves convinced — with him — that Nosenko is a Red herring, Epstein's one-sided treatment is . . . well one-sided.

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