

Bad seed of Warren report grew 30 yrs. of distrust

By GAETON FONZI

It's now a given that Americans have become cynical, imbued with a deep frustration and a sense of alienation from those they have chosen to run their government for them. They no longer accept as totally truthful what anyone says in Washington or even in state and local governments.

This may shock you Generation Xers: There was a time when the people did. They did believe what their elected officials told them. What happened?

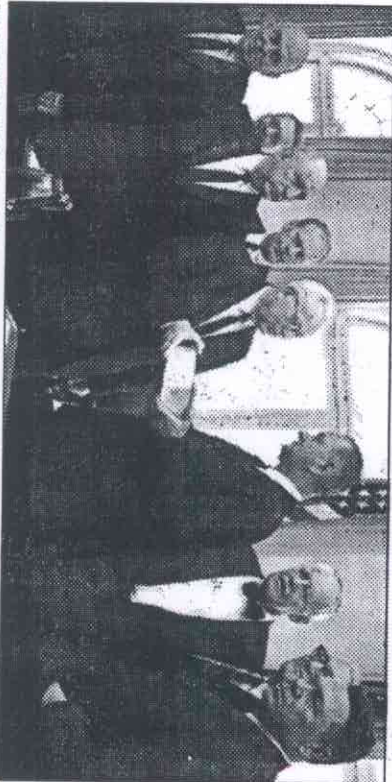
Last week reminded us. It was the 30th anniversary of the issuance of the Warren Commission Report.

Pundits have proffered one or a combination of events as seminal to the growth of distrust of government — from the assassination of President John F. Kennedy to Vietnam to Watergate to Iran-Contra. But I suggest it is the Warren Commission Report — a weighty tome produced by some of the most respected men in America — that planted the seed of distrust.

The American people expected the Warren Commission to put closure to the most tragic and traumatic event they had ever collectively endured. We expected the Warren Commission to give us a foundation on which to rebuild our faith in our government's integrity and in the validity of our democracy.

History tells us — shouts at us — that it failed those expectations. Now, polls say, as many as 85% of Americans don't believe the Warren Commission told the truth.

By Executive Order No. 11130, on Nov. 29, 1963, President Lyndon Johnson directed the commission to "evaluate all the facts



30 YEARS AGO—President Johnson accepts the report from Chief Justice Warren

and circumstances surrounding the assassination." The commission didn't do that. It deemed it had a more important mission, conveyed by Johnson when he pressured a reluctant Chief Justice Earl Warren to accept the chairmanship. The country, said Johnson, had to be assured there was no conspiracy, especially a foreign one that might ignite desire for revenge and trigger a nuclear war.

Years later, Johnson would tell reporter David Wise that he told Warren, a first lieutenant in World War I, that he knew he would walk across the Atlantic to save the lives of three Americans. Now, Johnson said he told Warren, "possibly a hundred million lives are at stake here."

And so the Warren Commission set out to determine how Lee Harvey Oswald alone

killed Kennedy. Four of six staff teams were assigned to deal with Oswald.

And because of pressure by Johnson to release the report before the next November's elections, the commission had to rush through its job, forcing its staff to ignore or bury evidence that might contradict its foregone conclusions. The result was a report that looked impressive in its bulk and weight but was loaded with conclusions not supported by the evidence.

That's not the speculation of a conspiracy buff. That was the determination in 1978 of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, for which I was a staff investigator.

A lack of belief in the Warren Report slowly began to creep into the American psyche and encompass other aspects of government, its agencies and institutions.

But public distrust was not allayed when Americans watched as the first six months of the new House committee's life was spent not on investigation, but in political lobbying to keep the committee alive and funded.

The first chief counsel was forced to resign when he insisted that certain government agencies, including the FBI and the CIA, which had been less than honest with the Warren Commission, be included as targets. The chief counsel who replaced him structured an investigation that looked good on paper but was, in fact, impossible to complete.

Still, I remember thinking, Congress wouldn't in the end permit something as important as a true investigation into Kennedy's assassination to be limited in any way, not from what we knew about the Warren Commission's failures.

I learned how wrong I was when the new chief counsel called his first staff meeting and revealed that the committee's priority was to get a report done within what was left of the committee's limited time and budget. I remember asking, "What about finding out who killed President Kennedy?" I was dismissed with a wave of the hand. "Oh, we'll do that too."

We didn't, of course. What we did was to deceive again the American people and add enriching manure to the ever-blooming distrust in government planted by the Warren Commission Report.

Happy 30th anniversary.

Gaeton Fonzi is a journalist and author of "The Last Investigation," a chronicle of his experiences on the House select committee probing the Kennedy assassination.