BOOKS

Assassination whitewash

INQUEST, by Edward Jay Epstein, introduction by Richard H. Rovere. Viking, New York: 156 pp. and appendices, $5.

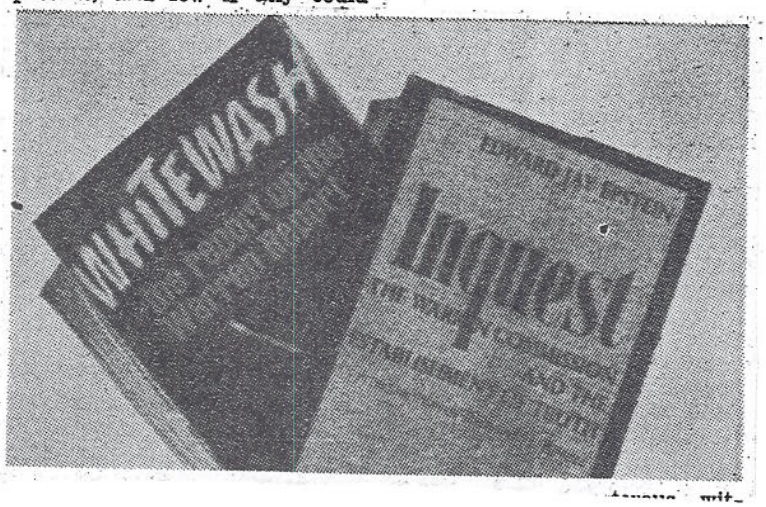
WHITEWASH, by Harold Weisberg. Published by the author, Hyattstown, Md.: 208 pp., $4.95.

WHATEVER ELSE it may have achieved, the Warren Commission Report on the Dallas triple-assassination of 1963 stimulated controversy about what kind of truth "somebody" so desperately needs to bury beneath such an avalanche of hokum. The official version of the crime was already patently fraudulent and, in this case, lies behaved in the normal way: their repetition and amplification in the Warren Report only made them more painful and sordid.

These books represent two skeptical attitudes toward the commission's labors, and more variants are to come. Epstein's, a Cornell doctoral thesis appropriately written as though by a promising halibut, shows that even young liberals are gagging on the report's "inconsistencies" and "apparent discrepancies" — respectfully yet with some risk to their social equilibrium. Its mentor, the New Yorker's cautious Washington correspondent Richard Rovere, reassures us in advance that the author does not "even question the fundamental integrity" of anyone concerned: the seven commissioners are men of "known probity" and furthermore the FBI is "in many ways an estimable organization." Having originally swallowed the official pill as the one that "best suited me," Rovere now "finds it his appalling duty" to endorse the possibility — which would knock the whole farrago for a loop—that there was more than one assassin. However, Epstein "is not saying there was a second assassin or that proof of the existence of one would necessarily alter the fundamental nature of the case."

PRUDENCE COULD hardly go further; yet as the motion of our liberal intelligentsia can be measured, this is fast going. Far more progressive pill-swallowers like I.F. Stone and Harrison Salisbury have yet to show the first signs of regurgitation, being preoccupied with the state of Soviet justice. Our gratitude for small and late mercies cannot suppress memories of the intelligentsia's ultra-slow burn over the "McCarthyist" inquisition, the Rosenberg-Sobell case and the Korean and Vietnam wars, whose justice many of them now question with Roverian appallment. The consolation is that, this time, no innocent lives could have been saved by higher liberal inflammability.

The equally prudent Epstein classifies "most of the writing on the assassination to date" as either "demonology or blind faith . . . the demonologists reason that as all the facts were not revealed, the commission must have been party to a conspiracy to suppress evidence." This is not quite accurate, but let us demonologists take a bow. In fact we no more know just who is in the conspiracy than just whom it is designed to protect; we just state what our senses perceive. Epstein himself notes that most of commissioners were more absent than present, and few if any could



futing their [illegible] and raising hobgoblins out of the murk—for example, that Oswald was an FBI informer at $200 a month—the report's authors either fudged it to "prove" what it disproved, or gave it a lonely grave in the 26 volumes of hearings and exhibits (of which there was no free distribution; even the House Judiciary Committee had to pay $76 for them, and they could not be bought separately) — or the witnesses were simply not called.

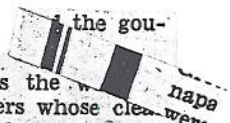
NEVERTHELESS Harold Weisberg's careful examination of all 27 tomes shows that, far from establishing the official theory, they blow it to smithereens. They also show a conspiracy beyond any rational person's doubt, speculations on which are left to the reader. But for raising all the pertinent questions arising from the "destruction, alteration and manipulation of evidence" and the "crediting of impossible testimony from preposterous witnesses," Weisberg paid the price required by national hypocrisy: rejection of his book by 63 U.S. publishers, so that he had to bring it out himself in photo-offset of his typescript. On the jacket he reproduces comments by publishers in turning it down: "Could have a very big sale," "highly readable and convincing," "exhaustive and responsible," "superb piece of research," "damned good."

The "only alternative to approving" the Warren Report is the conclusion that Oswald killed neither Kennedy nor Officer Tippit. (The Tippit case is "so feeble that it lacks even official certification that he is dead," let alone an autopsy.) Perhaps Weisberg's greatest contribution is putting together all we can yet know of how the assassins prepared the trap for their pre-selected pigeon, partly by creating a "false Oswald" before the crime whose "obvious existence" both FBI and the Warren commission ignored. Weisberg also makes the best-yet analysis of Marina Oswald's role and of Oswald's relations with Cubans in the U.S.—presumably, from the rather slim evidence, as a provocateur for the FBI. Oswald's return from the U.S.S.R. with his ex-Komsomol wife makes no sense except in terms of recruitment for some kind of U.S. "intelligence," and no hygienic explanation has been offered.

WHAT IS NOW most needed is a psychoanalysis of a society which, against a reaction abroad ranging from embarrassment to derision, can accept such arrant flimflam about the murder of its own President. An important part of it would analyze the rapid oblivion to which most Americans and foreign pro-Americans have consigned the "incident." A Canadian publisher spoke for all of these in immortal words to Weisberg: "The young man had a certain number of admirers in this country and the news of his tragic death was naturally a shock, but very few of us have, I think, any continuing interest in either the man or the circumstances of his death."

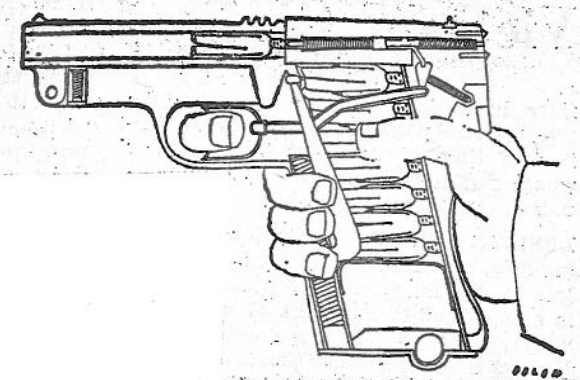
Epstein's book is a suitable gift for some open-minded aunts, but for us demonologists —since we have Weisberg's—of merely clinical interest as a study of the agonizing liberal mind.

Whitewash is the complete and indispensable guide to the



THE REPORT is the [illegible] a few staff lawyers whose clear purpose—either by someone's instructions or because they just "got the wave-length" from President Johnson—was to present more persuasively and less crudely the "findings" of the FBI. Even so, the liars cannot always agree which lie to tell. In the chaotic "investigation" of the shots fired at Kennedy (which had to be three in number to support the one-assassin theory, although demonstrably there were more) the commission contradicts the FBI as to which shots did what; and the different statements of Dallas doctors and Bethesda autopsists make the confusion total. The doctors emerge from the Warren Report like straight men in a vaudeville, trying to be dignified as the "investigative" clows wham their graying heads with bladders. As for the police's performance, in a crime committed in the presence of more cops than any in history, let us just say it was unique.

With so much testimony re-



Folon in Le Nouvel Observateur, Paris

Warren Report, and an absolution from all guilt feelings about not reading for oneself this vast and tragic agglomeration. As a non-raucous patriot he wrote it, with all the restraint consistent with decent humanity, not to defend the pitiful Oswald but because "Oswald's rights are the country's rights." The only hope for truth, he believes, is a congressional investigation. One might ask: If Kennedy's widow and brothers accept the Warren Report without a word, what can be expected from a Congress in which the brothers are eminent "liberals?"

A more useful question might be posed to themselves by people who never thought highly of Kennedy on his interrupted record, but cannot dismiss the implications for America of the Dallas "incident." If the need is so overwhelmingly to conceal how "the young man" was assassinated, does this not suggest a re-evaluation of the direction in which he may have been heading?

—Cedric Belfrage