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More Doubts, and a New (Conspiracy) Theory

By ELIOT FREMONT-SMITH

THE SECOND OSWALD. By Richard H. Popkin. Introduction by Murray Kempton. 174 *pages. Avon. Paper,* 95 *cents.*

IT seems a reasonable surmise that until this summer most Americans, including most Americans who consider themselves both open-minded and well-informed, accepted the major conclusions of the Warren Commission's report on the assassination of President Kennedy. The commission held that Lee Harvey Oswald had shot and killed the President and wounded Governor Connolly from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository building. The report also said that Oswald had later shot and killed J. D. Tippit, a Dallas policeman; that he had done all this by himself, and that Oswald had not been a party to any assassination plot or conspiracy.

But if this was the general opinion, it no longer appears to be so. The latest Louis Harris poll indicates a growing doubt about the circumstances of the assassination and claims that a majority of the public now believes that the Warren Report, for all its massive documentation, does not contain the full story. It further reports that more people (46 per cent as against 34 per cent, for what that's worth) think Oswald was involved in a plot than that he acted alone.

Public opinion can, of course, be wrong, and so can public opinion polls. Yet if such a shift in opinion has taken place, it is no doubt in large part due to the spate of books and articles that have come out attacking the Warren Commission, its findings, its methods and even its motives.

Until recently, these attacks have been dismissable as too shrill, too one-sided, too insulting and paranoid, and too much the work of habitual dissenters, left-wingers and/or eccentrics. Then last July, Edward Jay Epstein's "Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth" was published—a soberly reasoned study that may now be called the watershed book of anti-commission criticism. It explored how the commission itself had operated, and suggested how it had become hampered by the very reputation of its distinguished members, by its lack of a proper staff and by extraordinary pressures for haste and unanimity and how it finally had been caught between conflicting demands, the demands of truth and the demands of what might be the best truth for the national interest.

One Book Paved the Way

"Inquest" was the first fully "respectable" critique of the commission's work. It has brought in its wake other, often angrier, books to the attention of serious readers.

In the July 28 issue of The New York Review of Books, Richard H. Popkin, professor of philosophy at the University of California at San Diego, wrote a lengthy article that started out as a review of the more recent and important critical examinations of the Warren Report, continued as a critique itself of the report, and ended up offering an answer to the frequent charge by defenders of the commission that no one had yet come up with a more reasonable interpretation of the evidence and solution to the assassination than that presented by the report.

Mr. Popkin's article has now been published as a paperback book with an added introduction by Murray Kempton, and appendices of pertinent documents from the Warren Report and the National Archives. For this reader, at least, "The Second Oswald" is a very hasty book, but fascinating reading, both because Mr. Popkin may be on to something in his outline of a possible alternative solution, and because he writes like a budding mystery expert.

Mr. Popkin's main thesis is that the Warren Commission's one-man solution is not just implausible but virtually impossible, in terms of the commission's own evidence. Like Messrs. Epstein, Mark Lane ("Rush to Judgment"), Harold Weisberg ("Whitewash"), Leo Sauvage ("The Oswald Affair") and others, Mr. Popkin is especially disturbed by the oddly pristine condition of bullet 399 (the bullet that supposedly went through the President's neck and wounded Governor Connolly, and then was "found"—Mr. Popkin suggests it was placed—on a stretcher in Parkland Memorial Hospital). He is also disturbed by sharply conflicting evidence over the paper bag in which Oswald may or may not have transported his gun, and by the continuing confusion over whether the first bullet entered the President's neck or six inches lower down his back. This last is important in establishing the angle of the bullet, the likelihood of its hitting the Governor and, indeed, the possibility that it never left the President's body.

About the Autopsy Reports

Mr. Popkin is disturbed too by the vague and conflicting reports of the autopsy performed at Bethesda Naval Hospital. And he

notes that certain crucial questions can be answered now only with reference to the autopsy photographs and X-rays. He reports that these photographs were never seen by the Warren Commission (one example, among many, of evidence not demanded and leads not followed) nor by the Federal Bureau of Investigation nor by the autopsy surgeons. Commission lawyers have stated that publication of the photographs was withheld at the request of Robert F. Kennedy.

In company with his fellow critics, Mr. Popkin believes that the Warren Commission accepted, rejected, investigated and ignored a great deal of testimony on the basis of its support of the single-assassin hypothesis. He believes no adequate solution is possible without a new and thorough investigation. There has already been talk of such an investigation in Congress,

In the meantime, Mr. Popkin offers a partial and hypothetical solution that, he argues, is at least more in accord with the known evidence than is the Warren Report's. It also accounts for some of the more bizarre discrepancies in the recorded testimony—particularly those that have reported Oswald in two places at once—as well as for the odd run-in with Patrolman Tippit and Oswald's peculiar self-assurance following his arrest. It is a theory of two (or more) assassins, with Oswald supplying a court-proof alibi both for himself and for the "real" assassin, should either of them be caught. Admitedly porous and incomplete, the hypothesis is intended to be suggestive of the possibilities of an alternative solution, and in this it succeeds.

There are those who will object to such a book on a variety of both good and questionable grounds—just as members of the Kennedy family are now reported to be objecting to magazine serialization of William Manchester's forthcoming (one trusts it is still forthcoming) book, "The Death of a President." But the assassination was an event that belongs to all of us, that none of us will ever get over. It is not further obfuscation (for whatever understandable reason) we now need, but greater clarity.