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Editorials

A new Warren Commission?

After months of diligent investigation into the details of President Kennedy's assassination, Richard J. Whalen has reached some profoundly disturbing conclusions, notably that "there is still room for reasonable doubt about the [Warren] Commission's essential finding—that Lee Oswald alone murdered the President." There are serious conflicts in the available evidence, this veteran reporter found, and the conflicts tend to support the possibility that there was a second assassin. To resolve these conflicts, he urges a new investigation by a special congressional committee or presidential panel of civilian experts, on the ground that "the enduring need is not only for the truth but for a determination of the truth in a manner that commands the respect of reasonable men."

We believe Whalen presents a persuasive argument, and we think there are good reasons for an official resolution of the challenges posed by the many critics of the Warren *Report*. Still, the nature of the controversy makes it less certain that a thoroughgoing public re-investigation would be the wisest course. Disturbing as the questions are, raising the possibility of conspirators still unpunished, the last thing the country needs is a spectacular sequel to the Warren Commission, with reporters and cameramen swarming around, with every bit of evidence spread out before the public, and with all the conspiracy-mongers crying out their dubious speculations.

Publicity and politics are both dangers to such an inquiry. It would be difficult to find anyone totally immune to the pressures that would inevitably arise—pressures to suppress the unpleasant, to cover up any mistakes, to leak conflicting versions of the evidence. Nonetheless, it would be a total rejection of our society to assume that we cannot create a fact-finding committee of indisputable impartiality, skill, experience, rectitude, and concern for the truth.

Nor need everything be investigated at once. Instead, a fact-finding group could concentrate on the major areas of controversy one by one, starting with the autopsy report. The essential X-ray evidence here would be available to such an investigation, as it was not made available to the Warren Commission and as it is not available to any private inquiry. And thus a re-examination could determine once and for all that the autopsy report was correct or incorrect. If it was completely correct, the Warren *Report* acquires important support; if it was even partly incorrect, a whole new series of questions inevitably arises. And so, step by step, the examiners could proceed through the ballistics tests, the Zapruder film and so on.

The possibility of a conspiracy is too ugly and too important to be left to gossip and speculation. The Warren Commission was appointed not so much to solve a crime as to heal a people's wounds, by proving that Oswald acted alone. In the short term, it succeeded quite brilliantly; in the longer term, its success has been eroded. Only by a meticulous reexamination of the disputed findings will its mandate be fully and finally carried out.