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THE VIEW FROM HERE

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The "arren Report is not enough

When the Report of the Warren Commission on the assassination of President Kennedy was published in the fall of 1964, most Americans, including me, welcomed its appearance with gratitude and something very much like relief. We had lived in the shadow of a monstrous event for nearly a year, and the national grief was compounded with all sorts of doubts, speculations and rumors about the facts surrounding the worst crime of this generation.

The Report -- with its 26 accompanying volumes of exhibits and testimony from 552 witnesses -- seemed precisely the instrument to settle those doubts and refute the rumors. The unassailable integrity of the membership of the Commission, the sheer size of the job the members had done and, most of all, the apparent soundness of the basic conclusions they reached -- these things restored calm and confidence for many people. That Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone on his own mad initiative from a vantage point ~~in~~ a sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository, had fired all the shots that killed the President and wounded Governor Connally appeared entirely the best, most compelling, most logical solution.

I suppose that no matter how tidy and persuasive a report the Commission had produced there would have been certain critics of it who would simply not go along with the conclusions. Whatever their reasons for it -- whether their convictions were honest or whether they acted in venal adventurism -- they would have popped up in the great broth of the ~~event~~, made their points and disappeared or not, depending on the clarity of their presentation and the public appetite for sensation. Much of the talk about a possible conspiracy we heard in the aftermath of the assassination had a shady quality about it that repelled me, and I hoped the Report would silence these voices.

But now, two years later, there are more voices speaking in contradiction of the Report than ever before. In a rash of books, ~~and~~ newspaper and magazine articles and television discussions, many are expressing serious and detailed doubts both about the adqauacy of the Commission's procedures and about the conclusions it reached. By their very nature, all of these expressions of opinion are highly controversial and some are carelessly delivered. But some of these writers seem to me to be sober and responsible, and at least two of their books have shaken badly my own comfortable feeling that the Warren Report had disposed of this ~~sad~~ matter.

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One, Inquest, by Edward Jay Epstein, began as a master's thesis on the Commission and turned into something quite different when Mr. Epstein discovered what he believed were certain glaring contradictions and omissions in the evidence. The other book is called The Second Oswald and its author is Richard H. Popkin, a philosophy professor who, from his own study of documents and evidence both in and out of the Report, has produced an alternative theory to the Commission's belief that Oswald acted alone.

I think it is fair to say that the basic findings of both these men are constructed around the conviction that it would have been virtually impossible for one man to do all the shooting. For example, the Commission theory that a single bullet passed through the President's back and then wounded Conally in the chest, wrist and thigh is questioned hard. If they haven't entirely swung me over to their view, I, like many others, am beginning to wish very much for further clarification. The argument that these critics have not produced new evidence to prove their theses does not persuade me that they are necessarily wrong, and I think the doubts they raise strongly indicate the need for more searching study.

It will be said that a reopening of the matter will not do the country any good and will reflect great discredit on the Warren Commission. As for the latter, it is interesting to note that the most responsible of the critics do not attack either the honesty or the intent of the Commission. Rather, they assault the procedures and the findings, and though I would rather not have it be so, I don't think there is much discredit in a group of good men being wrong.

As for the possible harm to the country, I think we should take the ~~possible~~ risks. There are some people who have always felt that the Report was seriously flawed. Others think that the truth of the matter, thoroughly revealed, might disclose a dangerous conspiracy, perhaps involving foreign governments, and that we might all be better off for not knowing about it. The possibility of such a sinister plot seems far-fetched to me, but if it ever existed, I would distinctly prefer to know about it.

There seems little doubt that the skeptics of the Report will continue to speak out, and that more and more people will be listening. That raises some important questions. Should the field of exploring and investigating this enormously complex business be left now to individuals acting on their own initiative? More than that, should the questions they raise be left for historians of future generations? Can we in the present bequeath to these historians a confused and sharply challenged record and let them draw their own new and quite possibly incorrect -- conclusions from dry documentation and from the testimony of witnesses long dead?