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Warren Report Criticism

RUSH TO JUDGEMENT. By Mark Lane. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. 478 pages. \$5.95.

WHITEWASH. By Harold Weisberg. Privately printed. 208 pages. \$4.95.

President Johnson set up a commission of eminent Americans, headed by Chief Justice Warren, to investigate and report on the assassination of President Kennedy.

Since the commission labored and brought forth its findings (basically, that Lee Oswald was alone in his mad act) a number of individuals have set themselves up in judgment over the Warren Commission. The motives of these critics are not particularly important but their impact, particularly outside the United States, has been enormous.

These self-appointed critics have succeeded to a remarkable degree in creating doubt that anything done by the Warren Commission will bear scrutiny. Whether they intended it or not, the critics have nurtured the idea that somehow there was an unholy alliance involving Oswald, his slayer Jack Ruby, murdered policeman J. D. Tippit and extremists of either the left or right. Further, the critics have created the impression that the FBI, Secret Service and Dallas police collaborated with the Warren Commission to conceal or distort any evidence pointing to the truth.

The first critic to rush into print with his version of what really happened was Thomas Buchanan, an expatriate American who pitted his conclusions against those of the commission in a book heavy with Marxist theory.

Another critique was the product of a bright student's master thesis. Harold Weisberg published his own book, hinted that publishers live in fear of governmental wrath if they dare dispense criticism of the commission. In view of the proliferation of such printed criticisms, his fretting about "Big Brother" and the publishers' cowardice is strange.

Indeed, Mark Lane's attack on the Warren Commission will be a special offering of the Book-of-the-Month Club and has been selected by the Mid-Century Book Club for September.

But what basis is there for criticism of the Warren Commission's performance or for suspecting odious and undivulged depths to the crimes committed in Dallas? To believe much of what Lane and Weisberger have to say is to stipulate that the commission was careless and lazy at best or attempting a massive cover-up of a monstrous and far-reaching plot at worst.

I can accept human error by the commission and its staff but not their involvement in Machiavellian designs. I can accept the possibility that the FBI is capable of error but not Weisberg's conclusion that the FBI report "is a tissue so thin and a polemic so undisguised that it would demean the labors of a hick police force."

For the most part, the critics use the evidence with which the Warren Commission worked but arrive at diametrically opposite conclusions. If the commission chose to accept the evidence or recollection of one set of witnesses, Lane is sure to lend more weight to witnesses or evidence which seems to contradict. Lane's work teems with the expressions: "as seems likely"; "is most unlikely"; "this would indicate," et cetera ad nauseam.

Lane, among other points, concludes four shots were fired at the Kennedy car while the commission concluded there were three. Lane is certain of the sequence of shots in terms of where they struck whereas the commission, with all the resources of government, could not be. Lane also is critical that the commission did not probe more deeply into the shots he indicates may have been fired head-on into the Kennedy car from a knoll near the overpass it was approaching.

Who does Lane propose the commission should have questioned? No other gunman or weapon was found. No shells were found on the knoll. And Weisberg, undermining his theories, writes that anyone can quote medical evidence to almost any end. Both he and Lane make much of the original impression of some doctors that the wound in the President's throat was a wound of entrance, in short, fired from in front of the car and hence impossible for Oswald to have fired.

One of Lane's less subtle techniques is to lambast the commission for accepting the word of an unpromising witness like Mrs. Helen Markham, who saw the fatal shooting of Tippit. But Lane does not boggle at shifting the stick to his other hand and whacking away at the commission for not accepting Mrs. Markham's recollections as to other events.

It is even less easy to explain why Lane testified before the commission, since he was not a witness to anything. His credentials were that he was chairman of a citizens committee of inquiry, an organization he founded. Lane also became attorney for Oswald's mother and attempted unsuccessfully to represent Oswald's interests before the commission.

I do not question the right of Lane or Weisberg to play the game of demolishing the commission report, splitting hairs finer than the breath of angels or of having theories of their own about the plot to kill Kennedy. But unless I am prepared to believe that the entire apparatus of the American government was involved in the plot and the subsequent inquiries, then I conclude that both authors are well-intentioned amateur detectives at best or guilty of committing balderdash to paper at worst.

I don't think anyone knows all the truth. I stood in the basement of Dallas' police station and saw Lee Oswald gunned down 12 feet from me and I thought I saw Jack Ruby as a very short old man in an overcoat. But I cannot substitute the theories of Lane or Weisberg for the anguished and sincere conclusions of the men appointed to come as close as humans can to the ultimate truth of the bloody affair in Dallas.

—JEREMIAH O'LEARY