

AN INVESTIGATOR CLAIMS THE LAST WORD ON OSWALD: KILLER, RED SPY, BUT LIKELY NO CONSPIRATOR

On the trail of Lee Harvey Oswald's foreign-intelligence connection, investigative writer Edward Jay Epstein tracked down 150 witnesses the Warren Commission overlooked. Three of his interview subjects met sudden, violent deaths—one became an apparent suicide during a lunch break midway between a scheduled four interviews with him. And another source, a former CIA agent, made the whole \$500,000 two-year research project seem like a not-so-poor-man's John Le Carré adventure. "He could only see me during certain periods and in certain settings," recounts Epstein. "And always in remote locations like the battlefield of Waterloo or a nunnery in the medieval town of Bruges or a topless beach club at St.-Tropez. He felt that if the CIA ever found out, he'd be in trouble—it was all very secret."

But Epstein himself emerged intact, and the resulting book due this spring—*Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald*—seems to deliver. The rumors, including one that Jack Ruby was a hired CIA gun and is still alive, are not in the final manuscript. But Epstein does document his finding that Oswald was, as previously hinted, a paid Soviet spy—and that he was known as such to both the FBI and the CIA long before John F. Kennedy's assassination on Nov. 22, 1963.

Both agencies, Epstein claims, were aware that Oswald had been tracking Kennedy's movements before that fateful day in Dallas. The author further charges the late FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover with covering up crucial evidence of Oswald's relationship with the Soviet KGB to save the bureau's face and his own. "Hoover's interest was in concealing the fact that Oswald was a spy," says Epstein, "because his agency, which was supposed to watch Communist agents, wasn't doing its job. So the FBI made Oswald out to be just a crackpot." In fact, according to Epstein, Oswald, who had been a radar specialist in the Marines, may have provided the information that allowed Soviet gunners to target Francis Gary Powers' U-2 spy plane in 1960. As it happened, one of Epstein's three pivotal sources who died (perhaps coincidentally) was



JUDY BUDOVITZ

Powers himself, in a helicopter crash.

Epstein still seems roughly satisfied with the conclusion of the FBI and the Warren Commission that Oswald was the lone gunman in the JFK assassination, but he leaves the door to conspiracy tantalizingly ajar. "I think Oswald was reasonably intelligent," he says. "He was very much a revolutionary before his time, but I don't know whether there was a conspiracy, or someone inspired him to do it, or whether he was a self-generated assassin. It's an extremely complicated story," Epstein concludes, "really six spy stories, and Oswald is the missing piece in the puzzle that makes sense of it all. This book is going to be very embarrassing to the FBI and the CIA."

Epstein, 42, a native of New York City with a Ph.D. in government from Harvard, has written one novel and four other highly regarded works of nonfiction. One of them, *Inquest* (originally his undergraduate thesis at Cornell), raised early questions about the Warren Commission's methods and findings. But *Legend* (CIA jargon for a spook's cover story) is clearly his most ambitious undertaking to date. With upfront money from the Reader's Digest Press and a subsequent Book-of-the-Month Club deal, Epstein was able to deploy four full-time and four part-

Edward Jay Epstein's task force produced staggering piles of looseleaf binders (above), not to mention such curios as a 1957 photo of actor John Wayne (right) visiting a Marine company in the Philippines—with the brooding figure of Pvt. Lee Harvey Oswald standing in the door.

time researchers—and to pursue the litigation that won him access to closed government files on Oswald. He even tracked down all of the 104 men who knew Oswald in the Marines in the 1950s, a dragnet that covered almost every state.

A bachelor, Epstein lives alone in an East Side penthouse with a terrace greenhouse full of orchids (an interest acquired from the former CIA chief of counterintelligence, James Jesus Angleton). The tower where he works commands a 280-degree view of Manhattan. His work supports his sumptuous life-style, and *Legend* may be his most successful work to date: The floor for bidding on paperback rights has been set at \$200,000. And even though he says the CIA and FBI have already undertaken a campaign to discredit him, Epstein seems genuinely unconcerned. "I might try another novel to fill in the time between projects," he says, and he once was involved with Mario (Godfather) Puzo in an aborted screenplay, "but investigations are what I really love to do."

CHERYL MC CALL