

Capital Reading

Book on the Warren Report Reads Like a Soap Opera

Rep. Gerald Ford

Reviewed by Laurence Stern

Staff Writer Stern covered events in Dallas after the assassination, and also the Warren Commission.

PORTRAIT OF THE ASSASSIN. By Rep. Gerald R. Ford and John Stiles. Simon & Schuster. 508 pp. \$6.95.

WITHIN A FEW DAYS AFTER RELEASE of the Warren Commission report last September, Life magazine was on the newsstands with what it touted as an "inside account by a member of the Commission." That account, by Rep. Ford, must have won him a reputation as the fastest typewriter in the House.

Now comes the book. It is a collaborative enterprise by Ford and John R. Stiles, described as the Congressman's "special assistant" during the ten months of labor on the Commission.

Why a book? The dust jacket tells us why: "Portrait of the Assassin" is not just one more book about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. It is the only book by a member of the Warren Commission . . ."

The "Portrait," the authors say, is intended for those who may not have "read and analyzed" the Report and its accompanying 26 volumes of testimony and exhibits—surely a big enough out-group to raise hopes of Best Sellerdom.

Their narrative, explain Ford and Stiles in their foreword, "lives and breathes with the emotions of those who suffered

through the events." Its design is such that "any reader could participate in the surprise, suspense and privilege of being a member of the Commission himself."

IT IS, IF you please, a soap opera rendering of the tragedy, conventionally slick and suitably packaged for daytime television serialization. The chapter titles (Marina in Washington, Romance in Minsk, Marguerite's Viewpoint) bring to mind the sudsy *Weltschmerz* of yesteryear and the bitter-sweet organ roll that introduced "John's Other Wife" and "The Romance of Helen Trent." In fact, the narrative adapts readily to the old radio format.

(Page 40) "Wracked by grief and mercilessly pummeled by this torrent of

mishaps, Marina, Marguerite and Robert Oswald fought to keep their equilibrium. Marina and Marguerite had been raced from one hotel to another . . ."

Other books will come, to be sure. Isn't the material all there, spread through the 27 volumes? The first great literary rush came just after the Warren Report was issued, when publisher raced publisher into print with paperback and hard-cover compendiums. Perhaps the Ford book signals the next wave.

Still, the tragedy of the assassination wants a novelist, one who combines great literary craft with the surest journalistic skill. A Tolstoy, Shakespeare or Dostoevski could not hope for a richer canvas.

Whoever dares to write of



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the tragedy of John F. Kennedy's assassination, however, will find the Warren Report nothing more than a starting point. The facts of the assassination are known to us as no more impeccable a panel of men could ascertain them. But much of its human truth still lies submerged under the patina of public words and public emotions.