

# Books of The Times

## The Effect of Books—I

11/7/66

By ELIOT FREMONT-SMITH

THE decision of the Kennedy family to turn over to the National Archives, though for severely restricted use, the autopsy photographs and X-rays of President Kennedy's body brings up once again the question of the political effect of books.

The decision, implemented last week, was said to have been motivated by the growing public skepticism over the findings of the Warren Commission. This skepticism seems to have been generated or stimulated by the recent spate of books attacking the commission report—especially two books, Edward Jay Epstein's "Inquest" and Mark Lane's "Rush to Judgement."

I do not wish to discuss here the rightness or wrongness of these books, but rather the political effect of certain kinds of books. In doing so, one necessarily plunges into a morass of contradictory assumptions, myths, circumstantial and hearsay evidence and wishful thinking. **GENERATE**

There seem to be no hard facts about the effect of books, nor any coherent way of measuring effectiveness. From "Uncle Tom's Cabin" through the muckrakers of 50 and 60 years ago to the analytical exposés of recent years (David Riesman, Vance Packard, Rachel Carson), individual books have had, everyone rather glibly agrees, a discernible social impact. But the precise nature of the impact in any given case is harder to determine, and meaningful generalizations seem virtually beyond us.

### Auto Safety Book

Did, for instance, Ralph Nader's "Unsafe at Any Speed" spur auto safety legislation? That is its reputation. Yet the book, which was published a year ago, came out after Senate hearings on the subject were already well under way. Moreover, the book received minimum attention until the disclosure, months after publication, that General Motors had hired private detectives to investigate Mr. Nader's background. It can be argued that the resulting scandal was more of a spur to legislation than was "Unsafe at Any Speed," though the book no doubt reinforced and gave specific focus to long-simmering resentments of the auto industry's power and apparent indifference to public criticism.

If one grants that the impact of "Unsafe at Any Speed" was due largely to a circumstantial side-effect (G.M.'s action against the author), what about the side-effects of other books? What about the side-effects of pornography or the recent bevy of books on L.S.D.? Don't they, at the very least, convey a preconscious sense of public sanction for perversion and drug-taking? Or what about the side-effects of the books attacking the Warren Commission? It has been suggested—and by people who will ordinarily go down the line against censorship—that these books exceed some permissible limit in undermining public faith in respectable institutions.

Conversely, popular "inspirational" books of the Norman Vincent Peale variety are

considered by some critics to be dangerous for the smug complacency that they may promote. And with these, numerous examples of books with presumed effects spring to mind. When Herman Kahn published his Rand Corporation-sponsored treatise, "On Thermonuclear War," six years ago, it was greeted with a chorus of outrage and abuse from supposedly libertarian critics who argued, in effect, that thinking out loud about the unthinkable was obscene because it could bring the unthinkable closer to reality. Other critics are worried today about Gerold Frank's "The Boston Strangler"; the book tells how to do it, and some nut may take a lesson.

Not these, but all, sorts of other books, including non-political ones, are thought to be useful political propaganda by various governmental agencies. It was recently announced that the United States Information Agency plans to spend \$6-million over the next 12 months to subsidize books that may further what it considers to be the American national interest overseas. The Central Intelligence Agency is thought to have also had its unacknowledged hand in books, and some for domestic distribution.

It is thus assumed that books can influence, teach and even undermine. But each case seems to be a separate one, and often books that most obviously wish to influence opinion seem to influence it very little. What has been the impact, say, of the waves of eloquent books criticizing American policy in Vietnam? Looking at American policy in Vietnam, one would have to conclude that the books have been politically ineffectual. Yet if they didn't exist, if the books hadn't been published, public attitudes toward the war might be vastly different than they are.

As totalitarian regimes well know, the matter of the effect of books can be crucial. Yet as soon as one tries to come to grips with it, to explore what books are effective and in what way and why, one sees that the factors involved are endlessly variable and complex. At the same time, one is aware of the absurdity of the problem—a chicken-and-egg conundrum.

Do books change opinions? Or do they merely activate opinions already held, or opinions for which predispositions are apparent (or can be considered after the fact have been apparent)? If so, under what circumstances? Is timeliness of content a determining factor, or can a book create its own right moment? To what extent does a book's persuasiveness depend on its force of argument? To what extent do manner, style, credentials and intent (or the concealment of intent), determine the effective response a book will get?

Clearly, a particular case is needed to unravel some of these questions, and for such a case one turns again to the critiques of the Warren Commission Report.

*This is the first part of an article on "The Effect of Books." The second part will be published Wednesday.*

# Books of The Times

## The Effect of Books—II

By ELIOT FREMONT-SMITH

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**T**O be effective—that is, of political or social consequence—a book must change the attitude of its readers on a particular issue. The change is usually subtle; not even the most open and reflective minds readily abandon strongly held opinions, and almost never by force of argument alone.

The change is usually from assumption to doubt, or from doubt to tentative conclusion, and rarely more than this. And the determinants of change include not only a book's substantive argument, but also its intent, manner, style, credentials and the circumstances under which it is published, read and publicized. *REVIEWED AND*

Or books that have altered public attitudes and thereby influenced public action, the most interesting recent examples have been the critiques of the Warren Commission report on the assassination of President Kennedy, especially Edward Jay Epstein's "Inquest." This book, published last summer, differed from its predecessors in several important ways.

Where earlier books attacking the commission findings were notably shrill in tone, "Inquest" seemed reasonable and sober. Moreover, the book did not attack the findings head on, but made itself more immediately acceptable to an uncommitted audience by an oblique approach, concentrating on how the commission went about its work.

### No Conspiracy Theory

Explicitly, Mr. Epstein's book subscribed to no conspiracy theory (though implicitly it did), thus it seemed more objective and was less offensive than its predecessors. The book was also relatively modest in terms of the action it suggested.

Where earlier books had called for no specific action other than what might be implied by a disbelief, in toto, of the integrity of the assassination investigation, "Inquest" called, first of all, for the appropriate release of the unexamined autopsy photographs and X-rays of President Kennedy's body—documents which, it was claimed, could settle much of the controversy over the commission's findings. These documents were turned over to the National Archives last week.

In the matters of intended audience and credentials, Mr. Epstein's book also differed markedly from its predecessors. The earlier critiques had been aimed, if at all, at predictable dissenters—readers who, for one reason or another, were prone to suspect conspiracy. "Inquest," however, was aimed at a more conservative and far more influential audience—the liberal intellectual Establishment, if you will, and its peers in communications, politics and the academy—an audience that tends to measure objectivity, responsibility or truthfulness initially by its rhetoric, and to reject what it regards as emotional polemics.

This audience had generally accepted the Warren Commission report, not as a complete explanation of the assassination, but as an eminently reasonable explanation. Moreover, after initial scares of right-wing or leftist conspiracies, it had come to the conclusion that a conspiracy theory was not rea-

sonable. This conclusion was based partly on the evidence, or lack of it, in the months after the assassination, partly on faith in the rectitude of at least some of the people conducting the investigation, and partly on an innate suspicion of conspiracy theories per se.

Yet this audience also prides itself on being intellectually open to alternative and even bizarre possibilities—so long as such possibilities come from acceptable (i.e., ~~un-~~ ~~work-~~ ~~able,~~ ~~respectable~~ ~~safe~~) sources. The sources could be judged partly by rhetoric, partly by intent and partly by credentials.

And here, too, "Inquest" was unique. It came with the proper credentials; in effect, it came from within the club. The book grew out of a Harvard graduate thesis; its publisher was the respected Viking Press; and it carried a laudatory introduction by the widely admired political analyst, Richard H. Rovere. Where previous books, lacking such credentials, could be publicly ignored—indeed for reasons both responsible and not, had to be ignored—"Inquest," by virtue of its manner and endorsements, demanded serious attention, and got it.

### Paved Way for Others

*What paved the way for it?*

In so doing, it paved the way for the other major critique of the Warren Commission report, Mark Lane's "Rush to Judgment." Although this book, too, was brought out by a respected publishing firm (Holt, Rinehart & Winston) and carried an introduction by slightly pugnacious but nevertheless eminent British historian, Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, it is at least questionable that "Rush to Judgment" would have received the wide and careful attention it did had not "Inquest" persuaded a particular audience that the subject itself was now acceptable.

Books that change opinions, even to the slight degree outlined here, are few and far between—far rarer, I imagine, than what bookish people would like to think. I have tried to suggest in the case of "Inquest" the mechanics of its effectiveness. Yet each case will be different, depending on the issue that is involved, the nature of the book's audience, the book's intent, logic, style, credentials and so on.

The generalities that can be inferred are mostly truisms. To persuade a person you must talk his language; to make someone think new thoughts you must make the circumstances as reassuring as possible. People are flexible, but within a very limited range, which is what will preserve us or seal our doom. At least there are many books around that tell us so, one way or the other.

Sitting in some publisher's office, there is a man who has a manuscript, which, he is telling some subeditor, can save the world—right now! Perhaps with the reflex of the reflective man, anything is possible, but most likely not. Under the infinitely complex, variable and delicate circumstances (the editor may say), it seems victory enough for a book to help get some documents transferred to the National Archives.

*This is the last of two articles on "The Effect of Books."*