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## THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE: THE WARREN COMMISSION BOOKS

It has been argued that with the recent spate of books attacking the Warren Commission's report on President Kennedy's assassination, the medium of book publishing once again has assumed a central position of influence in a matter of public debate. The parallels that are urged include Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," Michael Harrington's "The Other America," Ralph Nader's "Unsafe at any Speed." Certainly those books were about matters of public interest, and their publication touched off public debates; to that extent, the parallel with the Warren Commission *critiques* is valid.

Where the parallel is less valid is in the question of *motive*. Miss Carson wanted to alert the nation to the dangers of overuse of pesticides; Mr. Harrington exposed poverty in America with the aim of eradicating it; Mr. Nader wrote in the hope that Detroit would build safer automobiles. In varying degrees, all three authors succeeded to the extent of seeing their books and their ideas become parts of the underpinnings of public policy.

What motivates the anti-Warren Commission books is a subtler matter. There is, of course, profit motive. When the original Warren Commission report came out in book form, it sold in great quantities to a nation which sought certainty about what for many Americans will be the central public event of their lives; as with December 7, 1941, millions will always remember where they were on November 22, 1963, when they first heard the terrible news from Dallas. The Warren report did not ultimately provide certainty, of course, and so a reaction set in. There was a public ready for books which would say what the Warren Commission *should* have concluded. The net effect of these books has been a heightening of the national uncertainty. This may not in itself be a bad thing, but it is hard to see it as a virtue in its own right.

Last week in New York, the Theater of Ideas held a symposium on the Warren Commission report and on the books that have attacked it. An observer in the back row found himself wondering about the extent to which these recent books were motivated by scholarship, the extent to which they were motivated by mischief. It was a partisan crowd that gathered in the loft where, in Spartan surroundings, the Theater of Ideas conducts its inquests. The most prestigious defenders of the Commission that the meeting's sponsors could muster were two lawyers who served on the Commission, and once or twice during the evening, it looked as though the audience was ready to march on them. We didn't stay to the end and can only hope that they got out alive; it was the sort of loft from which escape under duress would not be easy.

The main shortcoming of the Warren Commission report probably was inevitable. It deals with probabilities, and this has proved not enough for those who would have certainties. In the absence of certainties, the conspiracy theory will not die, and to take that theory to its ultimate conclusion is to think the unthinkable.

Yet the Commission's critics may get their day in the federal sun. Rep. Theodore Kupferman (R., N.Y.) has proposed that in the light of the recent critical books, a joint House-Senate committee review the Warren Commission's work. Another public airing of the events in Dallas is a painful prospect to contemplate. But it may come to that, and if it does the books will have helped to bring it about. For clearly these books have deeply touched a portion of the public which is not satisfied with knowing what is imperfectly known, which demands consistency where none is likely, which will be content only at the last with the imposition of theory on what probably defies theorizing. Inquiry can reach a point of futility, and motives can come to obscure facts; the Warren Commission controversy is approaching that dangerous flash-point. R.H.S.