

Carl T. Rowan

New Probe of Assassination Would Bring Pointless Pain

On April 15, one hundred and one years ago, William Pitt Fessenden, newly elected U. S. senator from Maine, stood in the New York Customs House and harangued a grieving and angry crowd. "We will hang Jeff Davis!" he cried.

This man, whom Carl Sandburg later was to describe as a scrupulous statesman, was giving voice to what the New York Herald called an "ominous muttering in the streets." Fessenden spoke on the morning that Abraham Lincoln died from an assassin's bullet, and he spoke with the assumption that the President had fallen victim to a plot that was hatched at the very top of the Confederacy.

The dangerously angry mob drifted away from the Customs House in grief that day because L. E. Chittenden, register of the Treasury, kept screaming that Lincoln "fell by the hand of a madman" until someone leaned out of a window and read a dispatch proving that Jeff Davis and his colleagues had not tried to kill Lincoln, Secretary of State Seward and others.

But the "mutterings in the street" continued for months and even years as imaginative citizens, enterprising newsmen, and a variety of publicity-seekers popped up with new theories and explanations as to who did what to whom, and why.

Even Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, who ran the country with the stern precision of a dictator during the hours that Lincoln lay dying, came in for some suspicion and criticism.

Same Comments

A lot of people note the rumors, suspicions, the



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theories, the "big plot" charges about the assassination of President Kennedy and mumble that "history is repeating itself."

But we cannot blame history for the "ominous mutterings" in our streets or in our bookstores. The simple fact is that human nature has not changed; so we may have to resign ourselves to at least a generation of noise from those who always know how to capitalize on a great tragedy, either to make a buck, make a headline, or indulge a childish fascination for making like Sherlock Holmes.

Even in the shock and gloom that followed Mr. Kennedy's death, there were people who know that suspicion is an acid that eats at the bowels of a nation. It was precisely to erase the suspicion, the rumors that would weaken America's unity and destroy the country's reputation abroad, that the Warren Commission was established.

What painful irony that the Commission report itself has given rise to so much controversy, to so many theories, so much headline-hunting!

I, for one, say nonsense to all this morbid speculation. The Kennedy clan has closeness and money, and if the Kennedys had the vaguest notion that the "real assassin" and other "plotters" were at large, I expect that they would long ago have begun a massive private investigation.

Life Magazine sees a "reasonable doubt" that Oswald acted alone and it, among others, wants to reopen the case. Life's doubts arise from an analysis of an amateur motion picture taken of the shooting. I found the rebuttal by Arlen Specter, a lawyer (now Philadelphia's district attorney) who worked in the Warren Commission investigation of the shooting, more convincing than Life's presentation of its own theory.

More Rumors Possible

But the simple fact is that both Specter and Life are dealing with fractions of seconds, ballistic theories, medical data and assumptions about human reactions that merely create issues that can never be resolved simply by "reopening" the investigation. What would result, beyond doubt, is another round of rumors and speculations—and perhaps another batch of books.

Unless someone has some new evidence that goes beyond split-second nitpicking and 007 mumbo-jumbo, the case should stay closed. It would serve both the nation and the memory of a slain president if we could somehow end these "ominous mutterings in the streets."