

An Inquest That's Still In Question

By Michael Dorman

STAFF WRITER

THE HISTORY CHANNEL'S "The Warren Commission" (tonight at 9) offers a respectable, solidly researched — but hardly innovative — look at the commission's work, on the 36th anniversary of John F. Kennedy's assassination.

Curiously, more than three decades after Kennedy's death, the most gripping parts of the two-hour show come not so much in its account of the investigation but rather in the compelling recapitulation of the familiar story of how President Lyndon B. Johnson cajoled, wheedled and bludgeoned prominent Americans into the thankless job of serving on the commission. Johnson is shown demanding of a reluctant Chief Justice Earl Warren — a military veteran — that he "put on the uniform again."

Sen. Richard Russell (D-Ga.), Johnson's longtime friend and mentor, initially refused to join the commission because he despised Warren over desegregation issues. "You're my man on the commission," Johnson insisted in a recently released audiotape from the presidential archives. "Don't tell me what you can and can't do. You're — sure gonna serve, I'll tell you that." Russell served — if petulantly.

"The Warren Commission" follows the one-hour "History Undercover: The Missing Files of JFK" at 8 p.m. Although network and local television news departments said they were undecided in advance how much coverage they would give the anniversary, the History Channel offerings appear to be among the more significant events planned.

Some coverage is expected to surface as a result of an annual convention of assassination researchers — most of

them conspiracy buffs — held over the weekend in Dallas. One researcher, Debra Conway of the JFK Lancer organization, has collected assorted amateur movies taken during the assassination period — to be released under the auspices of the Sixth Floor Museum on the site where the fatal shots were apparently fired.

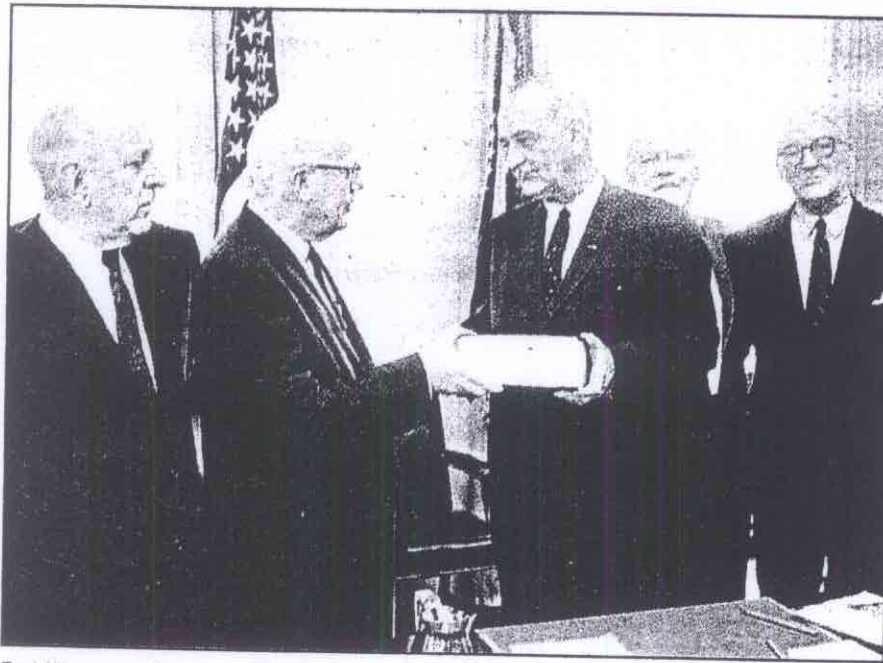
The History Channel's "Warren Commission," flaws and all, has its merits. It does not seek to judge the validity of the commission's findings but merely to examine the process the panel pursued.

In 1966, a young academician named Edward Jay Epstein used a similar technique in a best-selling book called "Inquest." Although Epstein appears in the History Channel documentary — which is not based directly on his book — it must be said that the printed word is more effective in this case than the TV program. Even a two-hour documentary must necessarily skim the surface of the story of the assassination and the investigation.

Thus, we see all the familiar snippets of movie and still film, see all the familiar faces, hear all the familiar bits of information about Lee Harvey Oswald and see for the umpteenth time Jack Ruby killing Oswald. The segments dealing with the commission members — although they have their moments of impact — break no significant new ground. Gerald Ford, who became president a decade after serving on the commission, assures us that over the years "there's been not one scintilla of evidence" produced to disprove the commission's conclusion that Oswald alone killed Kennedy.

All the familiar doubts about the single-bullet theory — that is, one bullet passed through Kennedy's body, struck Texas Gov. John Connally and somehow emerged relatively whole —

See WARREN on B10



Part 2

Newsday
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Earl Warren and commission members present their findings to President Lyndon Johnson, above. The commission's work is the subject of a documentary tonight at 9.

Taking a Look at a Not-So-Final Inquest

WARREN from B9

are regurgitated. We are told that Sen. Russell, among others, could not buy the theory. But all that has been known for years.

The familiar critics of the commission appear still again. G. Robert Blakey, a law professor who headed the staff of a House committee that explored the assassination anew in the 1970s, solemnly pronounces judgment on the work of the commission members and other government investigators. "That's where we lost our innocence," he intones. "Our government lied to protect us. We need the truth so we can make our own judgments." True enough, but Blakey has said all that before — in a 1981 book touting his own work for the House committee, among other forums.

Still, there is value in the History Channel documentary — produced by CS Films, with Charlie Maday as executive producer. It does remind us, for example, that former CIA Director Allen Dulles shocked his fellow commissioners by saying the FBI, like the CIA, would lie if necessary to protect its interests and what it perceived as the national interests. With the FBI now under attack on charges of lying on several fronts, it is a relevant chunk of information.

That does not mean someone other than Oswald killed Kennedy, nor that there was a conspiracy. But the History Channel makes that distinction clear — thus placing this documentary a notch above many seen over the years. ■

Michael Dorman covered President Kennedy's assassination for Newsday.