

Leave It Alone

Last week, the nation marked the third anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The shock, the disbelief and the grief of that moment of recent history has, in large measure, faded. But the questions that arose on the afternoon of November 22, 1963, are still being asked.

The Warren Commission, which undertook to answer those questions, is under heavy fire. In books and magazines, in thinly veiled works of fiction, in plays and from lecture platforms around the world, the commission's work has been assailed as either slipshod or deliberately misleading.

The outcry over the commission's findings, which started in the lunatic fringe, has picked up influential and respected support. Leading publications—among them Life Magazine and the New York Times—have come to the conclusion that the best interests of the nation would be served if the case were reopened.

We do not agree.

Given the circumstances of the assassination and the subsequent killing of the chief suspect, it was inevitable that the questions should arise. Nor is it in any way surprising that the doubts persist after the verdict of the official investigation was handed up.

But to argue that the Warren Commission has set out purposely to mislead the nation by covering up some awful truth is to argue a patent absurdity that can appeal only to unreasoning devotees of the conspiracy theory of history. The whitewash theory must presuppose a plot led by the chief justice of the United States and the congressional leaders of both parties with the active participation of the FBI, the CIA,

the Secret Service and the elected officials and police departments of a score of state and city governments.

And the commission investigation, far from being a slipshod affair, was almost certainly the most exhaustive study of a crime ever undertaken. During the 10 months of the study, the commission mobilized and utilized every federal and state investigative body. Some 27,000 individual interviews were conducted by or on behalf of the commission. Expert witnesses and the most advanced technological resources were called into action before the official finding was made.

There is not now, nor can there ever be, an absolute certainty about the fateful events that combined to produce the tragedy in Dallas. All that the commission could possibly do was to provide the best informed interpretation of exactly what happened and exactly why it happened. Such interpretation is, of necessity, open to criticism and to second guessing by those with axes to grind, with books to sell or with honest doubts.

But the fact remains—as J. Edgar Hoover has pointed out—that not one shred of evidence not available to the commission has been unearthed by the amateur sleuths and the doubters. Any new commission would therefore be considering precisely the same set of facts. It is difficult to conceive that it would come up with any finding other than that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, assassinated the President of the United States.

And the questions and doubts—the inevitable legacy of Dallas—would remain. Let us, therefore, leave well enough alone.