

A BOOK FOR TODAY

'Quest for Domestic Tranquility'

By DONALD MINTZ

INQUEST: THE WARREN COMMISSION AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF TRUTH. By Edward Jay Epstein. Introduction by Richard H. Rovere. With a partial text of a previously unpublished FBI report: "Investigation of Assassination of President John F. Kennedy, November 22, 1963." Illustrations, 234 pages. The Viking Press. \$5.

Edward Jay Epstein's book, "Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth," has already been the subject of a certain amount of slightly lemon-tinted journalism. Today is publication day and it is inevitable that sensation-mongering will increase in quantity and turn a much brighter shade.

Under the circumstances, it is not a bad idea to bear in mind what the book is supposed to be about and what a good part of it is actually about, the two unfortunately not being entirely the same.

"Inquest" is the outgrowth of a master's thesis in government for Cornell University, and its author is now taking his doctorate at Harvard. "The primary subject of this book," writes Epstein, "is the Warren Commission, not the assassination itself. It attempts to answer the question: How did the commission go about searching for such an elusive and many-faced quarry as the truth?"

This, after all, is a reasonable question. It is not every day that the chief justice of the United States undertakes to act something like the foreman of a coroner's jury. And given the volume and the political and emotional complexity of the evidence in the case, the way the commission and its staff were organized was bound to affect in sub-

stance as well as in quality the sort of results they got.

This organization, then—and to some extent, the attitudes that produced it—are the nominal subject of the book. On the basis of documents, many unpublished, and extensive interviews, Epstein discusses the way the staff was set up, its relation to the members of the commission, the extent to which the commissioners were involved and the nature of their involvements. He finds that the practical effect of these details was to make the commission staff dependent on the FBI for a good deal of its information, even in areas where there was substantial reason to believe that an independent investigation would be useful. He finds, too, that the division of subject matter among various staff members operated so that some questions—the most potentially embarrassing ones—would be more difficult to perceive and explore than others. Moreover, thorough work was made impossible by excessive deadline pressure.

But beyond this, there is the matter of the "many-faced truth." Of course, there was the coroner's jury truth. But there was also "political truth." The facts, so-called, are not as obvious as people often think. They must be evaluated and interpreted, and it is perfectly natural that the commission and its staff would make decisions—about whom to believe in cases of

conflict or discrepancy, for example—that would reflect their judgment of the best interests of the country more than they would indicate total disinterest. Richard Rovere's introduction puts it well. "... Edward Jay Epstein ... amply demonstrates," he writes, "that the 'quest for truth' was also a quest for domestic tranquility," and—this is the key—"that the second quest often got in the way of the first."

But these things cannot be discussed in the abstract. Epstein thus comes to "the assassination itself" on which he spends so much time that his ostensible subject is sometimes nearly lost. He shows—and shows to the satisfaction of the highly skeptical Rovere—that problems of timing, questions about the autopsy report and other matters suggest that more than one man shot at the President. Apparently quite a few of the commissioners felt the same way, and this and other difficulties produced some frightful wrangles among the staff. One assassin or more? This is what Epstein calls "the threshold question." It is the question that he considers was not adequately dealt with, not because there was a conspiracy, not because of conscious dishonesty, but because a human institution designed to ask a question will be organized in a manner and under circumstances that suggest what the answer ought to be.

A QUOTATION FOR TODAY

Leisure time should be filled with a sense of purpose if we are to have any sense of living at all. There are substitutes for purpose that come in bottles, television tubes, and

wild living ... but let's not go into all that. ... Just look at your own leisure, and see if it has any meaning at all to you.

Connie O'Connor in "The Leisure Wasters" (Barnes.)

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