

Strange History of 'Whitewash'

Donald Stanley

A poor choice of words on my part in a column on the Warren Report and its critics (Aug. 14) has brought a three-page letter from Harold Weisberg of Hyattstown, Md.

Weisberg is the author of "Whitewash: The Report on the Warren Report," and he has had enough trouble being heard without my adding to his burden.

What he objected to was a statement saying: "The controversy surrounding the (Warren) Commission's findings has bred some extremism. Weisberg, as the title of his book suggests, represents one such posture..."

Well, nobody wants to be called an extremist these days. What I was trying to point out was the extremity of divergence in interpretations of the famous Report by those who have studied it. Louis Nizer—whom I cited as one "extremist"—said the Report settled everything; Weisberg says it was, well, a whitewash.

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"WHITEWASH" has a strange history. The first of the books to study comprehensively the Report of the Warren Commission and its 26 volumes of supporting testimony, Weisberg's manuscript was completed in February, 1965.

Publisher responses to the story when submitted to them were frequently ecstatic: "We will make it the best selling book of the year" ... "Fascinating and certainly worthwhile ... a damned good writer who has written a damned good book" ... "an exhaustive and responsible analysis" ... "no other book I'd rather see in print."

This is the sort of reaction writers dream about. The results, however, were something else. "Whitewash" as it appeared late last summer was a typewriter offset paperback, its publisher was the author himself. Of 63 American publishers and 11 European, none would touch what was then considered a work of controversial and iconoclastic criticism.

Despite the almost insurmountable difficulties involved in producing, marketing and obtaining publicity and reviews of a self-published manuscript Weisberg's able book has done remarkably well.

"By the end of the first week of August," he said in his letter, "'Whitewash' had sold more than 9,000 copies." A fourth printing—this one of 5,000 copies—has just been run off. Most of the sales have come in the past three months, says Weisberg, and the first splurge from the larger cities came from Bay Area readers.

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THE AUTHOR also reports that major publishers' interest is again rising. One of them, ironically enough, is

considering doing the book in its present typescript form, feeling that the rough appearance gives it an "inside quality."

Hyattstown, which now must be listed as a "publishing center" thanks to "Whitewash," has a population of less than 150. Weisberg and his wife live on a small farm there where they spend their spare time taming wild geese. The author has written for newspapers and magazines, has worked as a Senate investigator and as an intelligence analyst specializing in economic and political warfare.

Weisberg's contention is that simple human error alone cannot explain why the Commission and its staff misread so much testimony and ignored even more.

Executive Order 11130 came from President Johnson on Nov. 29, 1963 and empowered the Commission led by Chief Justice Warren "to satisfy itself that the truth is known as far as it can be discovered..."

But Weisberg says the Commission never acted as an investigative body in any true sense. Instead it took a voluminous statement of FBI findings as the conclusion to be reached—except where certain of those findings contradicted the "lone assassin" conclusion, in which case the Report "corrected" them.

"From the outset," says Weisberg, "it became clear that the main, if not exclusive, effort of the Commission would be to validate this FBI report."

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WEISBERG POINTED out the discrepancies accepted by the Commission in testimony as to the identity of Oswald in the Book Depository window, of his incredible "escape route," of the number of shots fired at Officer Tippit (indeed, of the number and placement of wounds in the policeman's body), and of Oswald's curious relationship with FBI investigators before the slaying.

He was first to point out the mutilation of evidence by the Commission staff (missing frames in the Zapruder film of the assassination), the destruction of autopsy notes, and the dismissal of medical testimony that at least one of the fatal shots came from the front.

He also propounds an alternate conspiracy theory of the Kennedy shooting, and names three persons whom he contends are more legitimate suspects than Oswald. Since the names came from the same source Weisberg used exclusively for his book—the Report and Hearings—the conclusion is that the Commission knew of this possibility too, but refused to consider it.

The implications of this contention are, of course, damning. Perhaps they account for publishing's reluctance to get too close to the fire.