

Walter Lippmann

A Preventable Crime

By Walter Lippmann

WHAT KIND of opinion, I ask myself, am I able and entitled to have about the report of the Warren Commission?

The massive document, which was released over the weekend, along with the 20 volumes of testimony which are still to be published, constitute the record of the posthumous trial of Lee Harvey Oswald for the murder of President Kennedy.

No contemporary reader, it seems to me, can set himself up as an appellate court capable of reversing the verdict of the seven commissioners. Only they and their counsel and their staff have heard all the evidence that is now available.

Because Oswald is dead and could not speak in his own defense, it is not possible to say — and the commissioners do not say it — that this verdict is conclusive. The attempt to reach a final verdict on Oswald is now in the hands of the historians.

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BUT we may be confident that the historians will find nothing to make them question the perfect good faith of the record which the seven commissioners have compiled.

These commissioners, individually and as a group, are absolutely and entirely above any suspicion that they might have, or would have, or could have doctored the record. This is a judgment which we today are qualified to pass on to posterity.

With this certainty about the commissioners, and in view of the scope and exhaustive detail of their investigation, there is no ground on which any contemporary man, here or abroad, should question the verdict.

The verdict is that Oswald alone murdered President Kennedy, that he was not a member of a conspiracy of Communists, Cubans, or rightwing extremists, and that Ruby, who murdered Oswald was not the agent of a conspiracy to silence Oswald.

The commissioners are quite aware that the truth, as they found it, is stranger than fiction. It is hard to believe. The truth was confused and made incredible by the mishmash of the first reports from the Dallas police and by the press.

But the truth about the assassination itself was made less credible by the fact that Oswald was murdered in the city jail two days later. For if there was a conspiracy, nothing would have been so necessary to its success as to silence Oswald.

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BECAUSE it is harder to believe the true story than it is to believe some theory of conspiracy, the commissioners have with painstaking thoroughness set down in detail the facts as they found them. As an example, let us take the assumption which is crucial to so much of the European literature of a conspiracy. It is that President Kennedy was fired on both from the book depository building behind him and from the overpass in front of him.

The supposed proof of this is that there was a hole in the windshield of the car. But the fact of the matter is, says the report, that while the windshield was hit, it was "not penetrated." The mark was on the INSIDE of the windshield only, and was certainly caused by a fragment from one of the bullets that hit the President and Governor Connally of Texas.

Having read a fair sample of the European literature of conspiracy, I spent much of the weekend reading what the report says about every point that had seemed to me puzzling. The report evades none of these points, and it deals with all of them factually and authoritatively.

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THE REPORT is critical of the measures taken to protect the President, and it makes certain recommendations which will, of course, be followed.

In general, it must be said, I think, that this was the kind of assassination which should have been prevented. It is obvious, for example, that Oswald had a record which demanded that he be watched during a visit of the President.

It is obvious, too, that it was gross negligence not to have searched and guarded the buildings along the well-publicized route which the President would travel.

Finally, there is the general rule that while it is never possible to provide absolute protection if the assassin is willing to die in the attack, less fanatical men can be deterred by the fear of being caught. Oswald tried to escape. He was not prepared to die. The crime therefore must stand as one which should have been prevented.

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