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One Lesson of the Warren Report

Thousands of Lee Oswalds may be living undetected and unnoticed in America today, and the records show that many a murder and many an assault on innocent persons has already been perpetrated by deranged individuals in innumerable instances of crime over the years.

If there is one lesson which the Warren Commission report plainly teaches, it is that the American people—through their Federal, state and city governments—have not given the attention that the problem of the criminally insane deserves. It requires not merely punishment and watchfulness thereafter, once the crime has been committed, but prevention, and this is a responsibility of organized society today.

Just a few days after President Kennedy was assassinated, this correspondent wrote in these dispatches:

"Oswald was a confused man, and neither American nor foreign political issues produced that confusion in the first place. He was the victim of an unhappy life. He was a man deserted and isolated. It's a familiar story of what brings on mental depression. Friends can be helpful, as the medical books tell us. But in our self-centered lives, where time is so precious, there is a tendency to pass by the broken-down human beings who need every day the warmth of human love and understanding, and finally, if all else fails, the benefits of psychiatric treatment and even hospital care.

"The stories of the tragic end of disordered minds have been told many times. Similar incidents are happening all around us every day, even within families, as husbands or wives commit murder and sons or daughters resort to the weapons of death."

The Warren report confirms these early impressions. It tells of how Oswald's mother,

who had been twice married, placed her children in an orphans' home due to lack of funds. It tells how a remarriage resulted in divorce, after several separations and reunions.

The report tells of a "gradually deteriorating school record" and of how young Oswald allegedly pulled out a pocket knife during an argument and threatened to use it on the wife of his half-brother. It tells how Lee, when he was 13, was "remanded for psychiatric observation to Youth House, an institution in which children are kept for psychiatric observation or for detention pending court appearance or commitment to a child-caring or custodial institution such as a training school." He was examined by the chief psychiatrist and interviewed and observed by various members of the staff.

Young Oswald's mother told the commission of her visit to the home and how her pocket-book was searched "because the children in this home were such criminals, dope fiends, and had been in criminal offenses, that anybody entering this home had to be searched in case the parents were bringing cigarettes or narcotics or anything." Mrs. Oswald recalled that her son cried and said, "Mother, I want to get out of here. There are children in here who have killed people and smoke. I want to get out."

The official report of the psychiatrist in 1953 said:

"Lee has to be seen as an emotionally, quite disturbed youngster who suffers under the impact of really existing emotional isolation and deprivation, lack of affection, absence of family life and rejection by a self-involved and conflicted mother."

In one of the reports in 1953, Mrs. Evelyn S. Siegel, a

social worker who had interviewed both Lee and his mother when the boy was confined to the youth house, reported that, while Oswald had suffered serious personality damage, "if he can receive help quickly, this might be repaired to some extent."

But Lee Oswald never received that help, says the Warren Commission report, and adds:

"Few social agencies even in New York were equipped to provide the kind of intensive treatment that he needed, and when one of the city's clinics did find room to handle him, for some reason the record does not show, advantage was never taken of the chance afforded to Oswald."

It is no answer to the whole problem to say that the Secret Service should have been more vigilant in Dallas, or that the FBI should have been able to transmit more information about Oswald's record to the Secret Service. The records of thousands upon thousands of "crackpots" are constantly being filed in Government agencies, and it is virtually impossible to find out where these individuals are at a given moment—least of all, to discover that one is hidden on the sixth floor of a big building, where it is easy to conceal a weapon and fire a shot unobserved by a motorcade containing Secret Service men.

The tragic fact remains that crimes like these will happen, and there is no sure way to prevent them. But there is a way to reduce their number and possibly prevent individuals from resorting to crime if their personal lives can be aided early enough and before criminal tendencies really take root. Society as a whole has a responsibility to face up to the enormity of this grave problem.