

The Evil We Escaped

The Warren Commission's factual recital of the news coverage of the arrest and detention of Lee Harvey Oswald is enough to persuade everyone that the circumstances in Dallas did not contribute either to orderly processes of justice or the clear information of the public.

Such confusion is likely to occur, it must be acknowledged, in the case of crimes of this nature. Some degree of confusion probably could not be avoided. Still, the news media and the authorities can do better than this and under the prodding of the Report's recommendations no doubt they will.

While we struggle with the evils that we have, however, we should not forget the evils that we escaped. If the information about the crime, because of the speed with which reports were gathered and transmitted, was not wholly accurate, the understanding conveyed by the press, in reports instantly disseminated, communicated to the country a general description of events which the months-long study of the Commission has not basically changed. This quick intelligence, in spite of imperfections, kept the whole Nation on an even keel, sufficiently satisfied the public curiosity to prevent hysteria and panic and was detailed enough to prevent rumor and suspicion that might have otherwise directed popular vengeance at innocent individuals or groups. This is a great gain and sight of it must not be lost in debate over how the news media performance could have been made better and how it could have been kept from interfering with the normal processes of justice.

No doubt the bar and the media, with proper study, can improve the standards of collection and presentation of such news; but any system that would totally preclude some confusion in a crisis of this kind no doubt would preclude the routine press coverage upon which citizens depend for the honest working of our law-enforcement agencies. To achieve the ideal functioning of officials, bar and press in an abnormal situation we must not sacrifice their proper functioning in normal times. The faults of officials, lawyers and newsmen arising from an excessive zeal to get and print the facts are often, as in this case, disquieting. The flaws of a system devoid of that zeal might be even more alarming.