

The Story Behind 'Inquest' and 'Rush'

By Joel Pimsleur

"A FEW people are making a frightfully good buck out of all this. It is a wretched, self-serving performance, dredging up the assassination — and twisting the dagger in the guts of America, to satisfy the sensationalists. It is a monstrous hoax."

Merriman Smith is an angry man. The UPI White House correspondent — who won the 1964 Pulitzer Prize for his eyewitness reporting of John Kennedy's assassination (and was one of the two reporters aboard the plane that brought the President's body back to Washington) — has himself been subjected to some extraordinary experiences in the past two weeks.

Since Smith dared to write an article in defense of the Warren Commission for publication in Europe (excerpts of which were re-run in the U.S.), he told *The Chronicle* that he had been deluged with vitriolic letters calling him a "traitor," a "lackey" of Lyndon Johnson, a "tool" of Wall street, and a "mouthpiece" for Texas oil barons.

Many of the letters came from Italy; most were from cities in Europe — where the first flickers of doubt about the assassination have now been fanned into absolute



E. J. EPSTEIN

certitude of a high level conspiracy.

The situation is now sufficiently serious to have aroused anxiety in Washington that the normal conduct of foreign policy between the Administration and friendly European countries may be impaired.

But the clamor is no longer confined to Europe, where conspiratorial theories of history have always had more receptive audiences.

What caused the shift in America from apathy to alarm? How did it happen, in the last six months, that it is the Warren Commission which has suddenly found itself on trial?

This is perhaps the one question in the case that is less mysterious than it looks.

For the mechanics of how it happened — how disinterest was turned to doubt — are perfectly susceptible to explanation.

It was not the first time in history that it all began with a book.

Not just any book — not even a better or longer book than Edward Jay Epstein's "Inquest" — would have done it.

Several tomes had already been published that were savagely critical of the Commission's conclusions, by Leo Sauvage, Thomas Buchanan, Joachim Joesten, Sylvan Fox, to say nothing of the many articles and countless lectures by Mark Lane.

But while they distrusted each other almost as much as they did the Commission, these men, in the public imagination, had long since been lumped together as veteran demonologists, and their criticisms were largely discounted.

What it took was a new voice. And Epstein's was that voice. Although published by Viking in June, "Inquest" was really launched with a 4000-word review by Richard Goodwin, on July 24, in *Book Week*. Four days later, it received a second major notice from Richard Popkin in *The New York Review of Books*.

From the outset, it was sig-



MARK LANE

nificant that although "Inquest" was never a major seller in hardback (a slim volume, it was a master's thesis in book form), it received not only a highly favorable press, but remarkably generous and widespread play.

Very shortly, its impact was to far outweigh its size.

The reviews (except for lawyer-reporter Fred Graham's in *The New York Times Book Review Magazine*) were long and lavish in their praise. Professor Popkin's front page review served as a launching platform for his own "Second Oswald" theory.

Richard Goodwin, also in a front page review, called the book "logical" and "de-

tached." He was impressed, he wrote, not only by the "reliability of Mr. Epstein's evidence," but by "his own truthfulness, detachment and reliability." Goodwin concluded that the book had raised "monumental doubts" and he called for an "independent group" to determine if the Commission's work had been defective enough to require another inquiry.

Soon similar encomiums began coming in from all over the country. Richard Rovere found the book "responsible, sober . . . compelling." Robert Kirsch in the Los Angeles Times called it "explosive." The Dallas Times-Herald called it "provocative, unemotional and well-researched."

The Washington Post spoke of "grave doubts." Van Allen Bradley called it "responsible." The New Republic concluded that the Warren Report "may now have been shot to death . . . and require a full autopsy!"

"A Pandora's Box"

Only Fred Graham and Fletcher Knebel in Look Magazine harbored serious reservations both about the book's scholarship and its intent.

Willy-nilly, it was Eliot Fremont-Smith, in a New York Times daily piece, who

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summed up the work's effect. "Inquest," he wrote, had opened "a Pandora's box."

Indeed it had. It had done so by shifting criticism of the Commission from the realm of demonology to the region of respectability. And it cleared the way for a whole new round of speculation.

It is probable to the point of certainty that no one except a serious, "dispassionate," "detached" student — with no apparent motive other than the pursuit of pure scholarship — could have brought it off.

But one wonders if the reviewers would have been so easily persuaded, or so charitable, had they known more of the background of the book.

It involved some brilliant advance work. About 2½ months before the first review appeared, Aaron Asher, the president of Viking, told Book Week editor Theodore Solotaroff that his house was bringing out an important book on the Warren Commission by a graduate student named Edward Jay Epstein.

"I had heard about Epstein's work before," said Solotaroff, "and had been intrigued by the idea of a sober, young student from Cornell taking his 3 x 5 cards and graduate school research methods into a field that had been occupied mostly by doctrinaire radicals and unaffiliated monomaniacs.

"Aaron's description of 'Inquest' as a careful, unpretentious and persuasive critique of the Commission . . . and his own tone—the quiet, persuasive kind that Mark Twain once likened to 'the calm confidence of a Christian with four aces'—left me with the impression that there was probably a major publishing event here."

The next problem was whom to get to review it. "I particularly wanted someone who knew his way around Washington," says Solotaroff, "but was sufficiently removed from its politics. I also wanted someone whose judgment would carry weight."

* The choice was Goodwin. He carried all the right credentials. He had been an aide of President Kennedy and the chief speechwriter for President Johnson. "He seemed to have the right qualifications," said Solotaroff, "and just the right 'resonance.'"

There was no reason for Goodwin to suspect that the book was anything but what it purported to be, or that, as he wrote: "The story behind the book adds to its weight. As a student at Cornell University, Mr. Epstein began, at the suggestion of Professor Andrew Hacker, a master's thesis on the problem of how a government organization functions in an extraordinary situation without rules or precedents.

"When he began his study, he tells us in his preface, 'I thought the problem far less complicated and intriguing than it proved to be.' And it seems that throughout his research, he was not trying to prove a case of his own, nor

trying to support a theory, nor attempting to discredit the Commission. . . ."

But did it happen exactly that way?

There now seems to be some disagreement among the principals as to exactly what did happen. Epstein says Hacker "suggested" the thesis; Hacker says Epstein suggested it. But the Chronicle has learned that a ubiquitous third man also admitted having a hand. That man was Mark Lane.

Epstein knew Lane before Epstein ever began his study of the Warren Commission report. And for a very good reason. Hacker introduced them. In the fall of 1964, Hacker, Epstein and Lane met at Hacker's home in Ithaca, N.Y. — where Lane was a house guest.

Hacker and Epstein had been admirers of Lane for some time, having attended his lectures together in New York. But by mid-1964, Lane had a problem. He had already engaged in a bitter exchange with Chief Justice Earl Warren, and had tried unsuccessfully to get one of the Commission attorneys to show him his working papers; by then he knew that he had not a chance in a million of getting anything out of the Commission — himself.

Who better to make contact with the Commission than an anonymous graduate student — "taking his 3x5 cards and graduate research methods" — with no axe to grind?

His Pipeline

Lane saw Epstein as his pipeline to the Commission. The two men met in New York, where for days they did preliminary spadework together — with Lane priming Epstein on what to look for, whom, how and what to ask in his own inquest.

How did it work?

The same Commission counsel who refused to give his working papers to Lane gave them to Epstein. And while working freely with the Commission staff on his "thesis," Mr. Epstein, according to Dr. Hacker, was also "sharing information" with Mr. Lane—until he got hold of a previously unreleased FBI report and told Lane he had decided to do his own book.

A sober, objective study of the workings of the Warren Commission? "From the beginning," Lane once conceded in a private conversation, "Ed was out to get the Commission."

Success Story

How well he succeeded becomes clear from the next chapter of the most fascinating publishing story of the decade. Before "Inquest" was published, Lane's book, "Rush to Judgment," had been turned down by 15 publishers.

His first publisher, Grove Press, had eased itself out of a contract on the basis of its own judgment that the book would not sell. Grove only had to sell 5000 to break even; Lane offered to sell that many himself — if necessary, "door to door" — to cover the costs. Grove still turned him down.

Meantime, Epstein's book sold about 20,000 copies in hardback. Not a sensational figure, but a respectable one. More important, it had opened the door. The market was finally ready. Criticism of the Commission had achieved respectability.

Holt, Rinehart and Winston, one of the biggest publishing houses in the nation — a firm that Lane had not even bothered to contact because he believed it was too conservative (Holt is 10 per cent owned by Texas oil interests; it is also J. Edgar Hoover's publisher) now approached Lane.

The rest is history: Epstein's book sold about 20,000 before going into paperback. Lane's sold 30,000 in the first two weeks — and exhausted its first printing. Since mid-August, it has sold over 113,000 copies, rushed through ten printings, and is still a runaway best seller.