Return to Dallas

by Alexander M. Bickel

It is well, although it is difficult, not to become impatient with the continuing flood of books about the Kennedy assassination. For the truth is that the Warren Commission not only left many strings loose that ought ideally be tied up, but failed satisfactorily to establish the central facts about the awful event. In these circumstances, it would be a devastating commentary

Six Seconds in Dallas
by Josiah Thompson
(Bernard Geis Associates; $8.95)
Accessories After the Fact
by Sylvia Meagher
(Bobbs Merrill; $8.50)

on the American spirit if we were all content to let the matter rest. *Fiat justitia ruat caelum*, Mr. Thompson's publisher, Bernard Geis, wrote him in accepting his book for publication. Mark Lane made the point, too, and so does Miss Meagher, who without particular cause, but merely out of free-floating anger and distrust, apparently considers the Kennedy assassination and its aftermath to be characteristic of "a society which often inflicts indignity, imprisonment, and even death on the obscure and helpless." Let justice be done. It makes no difference who is saying it; that is the fitting sentiment.

Whether both of these books bring us nearer to the establishment of truth and justice is another question. Miss Meagher was the author, about a year and a half ago, of a welcome – and the only – *Subject Index to the Warren Report and Hearings and Exhibits* (Scarecrow Press, 1966). Her present book is the fleshed-out index – that is, text and summaries instead of page references – plus a running and disjointed critical commentary. It literally disassembles the Warren Report into bits and pieces, each of which it examines briefly with a magnifying glass if not a microscope. Miss Meagher does not put the bits and pieces together again – which is all right, it was not her object, and for the researcher the book performs a function. But the trouble with it, as with Mark Lane's earlier *Rush to Judgment*, and Leo Sauvage's *The Oswald Affair*, is that it is indiscriminate. Miss Meagher extends the scrupulous equal protection of her attention to every doubt, every ambiguity, every startling coincidence, every loose string, even though, unlike Mr. Lane, for example, she does make a few concessions in favor of the Commission's findings.

Now many doubts and ambiguities resolve themselves once the central facts are known, and other ones are revealed as unimportant. So it is in every investigation. If the Warren Commission had adequately established an essential sequence of events – how the assassination was committed, and hence by whom – it would be foolish, despite remaining peripheral questions, to insist that a second investigation is called for. Miss Meagher ends her book with a plea for a second inquiry, in which I, for one, would join, even this late in the day. But to be persuasive, such a plea must proceed from a demonstration that essential facts are yet to be established. The elements of a demonstration of this sort are nothing new, and they are there in the interstices of Miss Meagher's book, but under layers of trivia.

Six Seconds in Dallas is rather another thing again. It is a padded book – and a picture book, too, with about half the space taken up by illustrations that, to this lay eye, are nowhere near as helpful as the author must have thought they would be. The padding consists of an elaborate rehashing of eyewitness evidence which is in itself not reliable, and becomes no more so when Mr. Thompson assembles it in statistical and then tabular form. But Mr. Thompson has a thesis, around which his book is structured, and which requires an answer that only a fresh investigation could provide. The thesis is that there were at least two assassins (Mr. Thompson thinks three), firing from at least two (again Mr. Thompson thinks three) separate locations.

I have stated Mr. Thompson's theory in reductionist fashion, and I am omitting mention of subsidiary propositions, because I wish to put before the reader the strongest part of the case he makes, those doubts which are not merely speculative, but serious, arising from objective evidence that requires explanation. Some time ago, Vincent Salandria, a Philadelphia lawyer, examining the famous Zapruder film of the assassination, thought he observed that when the President received the last and fatal shot to the head, he first was hurled forward – as one would expect after a shot coming from the rear – but then after a split second moved left and backward. Mr. Thompson has pursued this observation in great detail and with much care. Apparently this is what happened. There is testimony by two Secret Service agents in the Warren Commission hearings (Vol. II, pp. 73-77, 139-141) suggesting that the President's car accelerated radically at about the time of the head shot, which would explain the movement back. But Mr. Thompson's analysis of the film discounts this explanation, and he may well be right. If he is right, some other explanation must be found, or another gunman, firing at almost exactly the same time from the stockade fence in front and to the right of the car, becomes a distinct possibility.

Mr. Thompson's book has its faults. Even where it is strongest, it offers itself a bit pretentiously, which is to say, not as tentatively as it should, and in other places it is quite athletic in jumping to conclusions. But in his analysis of the Zapruder film, and also with respect to a curious dent in one of the cartridge cases found in the Texas School Book Depository Building, Mr. Thompson calls attention to aspects of the physical evidence which the Warren Commission ignored, which raise serious, indeed crucial, questions, and – what is most important – which could be fruitfully reinvestigated even now. Testimonial evidence has gone stale or has vanished. But the physical evidence is there, as good as ever. It may not be possible to arrive at confident answers about all the questions that it raises. The attempt should, however, be made by another official body, for the Warren Commission did not try hard enough.