

# Books of The Times

## The Effect of Books—I

By ELIOT FREMONT-SMITH

THE decision of the Kennedy family to turn over to the National Archives, though for severely restricted use, the autopsy photographs and X-rays of President Kennedy's body brings up once again the question of the political effect of books.

The decision, implemented last week, was said to have been motivated by the growing public skepticism over the findings of the Warren Commission. This skepticism seems to have been generated or stimulated by the recent spate of books attacking the commission report—especially two books, Edward Jay Epstein's "Inquest" and Mark Lane's "Rush to Judgement."

I do not wish to discuss here the rightness or wrongness of these books, but rather the political effect of certain kinds of books. In doing so, one necessarily plunges into a morass of contradictory assumptions, myths, circumstantial and hearsay evidence and wishful thinking.

There seem to be no hard facts about the effect of books, nor any coherent way of measuring effectiveness. From "Uncle Tom's Cabin" through the muckrakers of 50 and 60 years ago to the analytical exposés of recent years (David Riesman, Vance Packard, Rachel Carson), individual books have had, everyone rather glibly agrees, a discernible social impact. But the precise nature of the impact in any given case is harder to determine, and meaningful generalizations seem virtually beyond us.

### Auto Safety Book

Did, for instance, Ralph Nader's "Unsafe at Any Speed" spur auto safety legislation? That is its reputation. Yet the book, which was published a year ago, came out after Senate hearings on the subject were already well under way. Moreover, the book received minimum attention until the disclosure, months after publication, that General Motors had hired private detectives to investigate Mr. Nader's background. It can be argued that the resulting scandal was more of a spur to legislation than was "Unsafe at Any Speed," though the book no doubt reinforced and gave specific focus to long-simmering resentments of the auto industry's power and apparent indifference to public criticism.

If one grants that the impact of "Unsafe at Any Speed" was due largely to a circumstantial side-effect (G.M.'s action against the author), what about the side-effects of other books? What about the side-effects of pornography or the recent bevy of books on L.S.D.? Don't they, at the very least, convey a preconscious sense of public sanction for perversion and drug-taking? Or what about the side-effects of the books attacking the Warren Commission? It has been suggested—and by people who will ordinarily go down the line against censorship—that these books exceed some permissible limit in undermining public faith in respectable institutions.

Conversely, popular "inspirational" books of the Norman Vincent Peale variety are

considered by some critics to be dangerous for the smug complacency that they may promote. And with these, numerous examples of books with presumed effects spring to mind. When Herman Kahn published his Rand Corporation-sponsored treatise, "On Thermonuclear War," six years ago, it was greeted with a chorus of outrage and abuse from supposedly libertarian critics who argued, in effect, that thinking out loud about the unthinkable was obscene because it could bring the unthinkable closer to reality. Other critics are worried today about Gerold Frank's "The Boston Strangler"; the book tells how to do it, and some nut may take a lesson.

Not these, but all, sorts of other books, including non-political ones, are thought to be useful political propaganda by various governmental agencies. It was recently announced that the United States Information Agency plans to spend \$6-million over the next 12 months to subsidize books that may further what it considers to be the American national interest overseas. The Central Intelligence Agency is thought to have also had its unacknowledged hand in books, and some for domestic distribution.

It is thus assumed that books can influence, teach and even undermine. But each case seems to be a separate one, and often books that most obviously wish to influence opinion seem to influence it very little. What has been the impact, say, of the waves of eloquent books criticizing American policy in Vietnam? Looking at American policy in Vietnam, one would have to conclude that the books have been politically ineffectual. Yet if they didn't exist, if the books hadn't been published, public attitudes toward the war might be vastly different than they are.

As totalitarian regimes well know, the matter of the effect of books can be crucial. Yet as soon as one tries to come to grips with it, to explore what books are effective and in what way and why, one sees that the factors involved are endlessly variable and complex. At the same time, one is aware of the absurdity of the problem—a chicken-and-egg conundrum.

Do books change opinions? Or do they merely activate opinions already held, or opinions for which predispositions are apparent (or can be considered after the fact have been apparent)? If so, under what circumstances? Is timeliness of content a determining factor, or can a book create its own right moment? To what extent does a book's persuasiveness depend on its force of argument? To what extent do manner, style, credentials and intent (or the concealment of intent), determine the effective response a book will get?

Clearly, a particular case is needed to unravel some of these questions, and for such a case one turns again to the critiques of the Warren Commission Report.

*This is the first part of an article on "The Effect of Books." The second part will be published Wednesday.*