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Books of The Times

The Effect of Books—II

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TO be effective—that is, of political or social consequence—a book must change the attitude of its readers on a particular issue. The change is usually subtle; not even the most open and reflective minds readily abandon strongly held opinions, and almost never by force of argument alone.

The change is usually from assumption to doubt, or from doubt to tentative conclusion, and rarely more than this. And the determinants of change include not only a book's substantive argument, but also its intent, manner, style, credentials and the circumstances under which it is published, read and publicized.

Of books that have altered public attitudes and thereby influenced public action, the most interesting recent examples have been the critiques of the Warren Commission report on the assassination of President Kennedy, especially Edward Jay Epstein's "Inquest." This book, published last summer, differed from its predecessors in several important ways.

Where earlier books attacking the commission findings were notably shrill in tone, "Inquest" seemed reasonable and sober. Moreover, the book did not attack the findings head on, but made itself more immediately acceptable to an uncommitted audience by an oblique approach, concentrating on how the commission went about its work.

No Conspiracy Theory

Explicitly, Mr. Epstein's book subscribed to no conspiracy theory (though implicitly it did), thus it seemed more objective and was less offensive than its predecessors. The book was also relatively modest in terms of the action it suggested.

Where earlier books had called for no specific action other than what might be implied by a disbelief, in toto, of the integrity of the assassination investigation, "Inquest" called, first of all, for the appropriate release of the unexamined autopsy photographs and X-rays of President Kennedy's body—documents which, it was claimed, could settle much of the controversy over the commission's findings. These documents were turned over to the National Archives last week.

In the matters of intended audience and credentials, Mr. Epstein's book also differed markedly from its predecessors. The earlier critiques had been aimed, if at all, at predictable dissenters—readers who, for one reason or another, were prone to suspect conspiracy. "Inquest," however, was aimed at a more conservative and far more influential audience—the liberal intellectual Establishment, if you will, and its peers in communications, politics and the academy—an audience that tends to measure objectivity, responsibility or truthfulness initially by its rhetoric, and to reject what it regards as emotional polemics.

This audience had generally accepted the Warren Commission report, not as a complete explanation of the assassination, but as an eminently reasonable explanation. Moreover, after initial scares of right-wing or leftist conspiracies, it had come to the conclusion that a conspiracy theory was not rea-

sonable. This conclusion was based partly on the evidence, or lack of it, in the months after the assassination, partly on faith in the rectitude of at least some of the people conducting the investigation, and partly on an innate suspicion of conspiracy theories per se.

Yet this audience also prides itself on being intellectually open to alternative and even bizarre possibilities—so long as such possibilities come from acceptable (i.e., trustworthy, respectable, safe) sources. The sources could be judged partly by rhetoric, partly by intent and partly by credentials.

And here, too, "Inquest" was unique. It came with the proper credentials; in effect, it came from within the club. The book grew out of a Harvard graduate thesis; its publisher was the respected Viking Press; and it carried a laudatory introduction by the widely admired political analyst, Richard H. Rovere. Where previous books, lacking such credentials, could be publicly ignored—indeed, for reasons both responsible and not, had to be ignored—"Inquest," by virtue of its manner and endorsements, demanded serious attention, and got it.

Paved Way for Others

In so doing, it paved the way for the other major critique of the Warren Commission report, Mark Lane's "Rush to Judgment." Although this book, too, was brought out by a respected publishing firm (Holt, Rinehart & Winston) and carried an introduction by slightly pugnacious but nevertheless eminent British historian, Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, it is at least questionable that "Rush to Judgment" would have received the wide and careful attention it did had not "Inquest" persuaded a particular audience that the subject itself was now acceptable.

Books that change opinions, even to the slight degree outlined here, are few and far between—far rarer, I imagine, than what bookish people would like to think. I have tried to suggest in the case of "Inquest" the mechanics of its effectiveness. Yet each case will be different, depending on the issue that is involved, the nature of the book's audience, the book's intent, logic, style, credentials and so on.

The generalities that can be inferred are mostly truisms. To persuade a person you must talk his language; to make someone think new thoughts you must make the circumstances as reassuring as possible. People are flexible, but within a very limited range, which is what will preserve us or seal our doom. At least there are many books around that tell us so, one way or the other.

Sitting in some publisher's office, there is a man who has a manuscript, which, he is telling some subeditor, can save the world—right now! Perhaps with the reflex of the reflective man, anything is possible, but most likely not. Under the infinitely complex, variable and delicate circumstances (the editor may say), it seems victory enough for a book to help get some documents transferred to the National Archives.

This is the last of two articles on "The Effect of Books."