

Themes and Variations

Mark Lane's Lecture

The Warren Commission's weighty tome is intended, among other things, to refute and stifle speculation about President Kennedy's assassination. A commentary on its immediate effect: One of the chief speculators was so anxious to be refuted he managed somehow to lay hands on the report early, and jumped the official release date two days in working it into his lectures.

New York attorney Mark Lane has been holding forth for several weeks in a small theater on New York's upper east side, and the ads promise he'll take the show on tour. Mr. Lane, an intense looking young man with dark glasses and crew-cut black hair, is a former New York state assemblyman and sometime volunteer counsel for Lee Oswald's mother.

He's also an experienced hand at the controversial cause. His legal talents often have defended ban-the-bombers and other public demonstrators. His departure from the New York Assembly followed a battle in which he accused the Assembly Speaker of a conflict of interest in a civil defense shelter bill. The Ethics Committee dismissed the charge and the Assembly upheld the action, 143-1, Mr. Lane expressing the dissent. Soon thereafter Mr. Lane announced his retirement from politics.

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In the current crusade, his intellectual method leaves no room for argument. Without strong evidence from other sources, as he puts it, "I don't believe a single word uttered in this case by the Dallas police, the Secret Service or the FBI." In effect he adds the Warren Commission to this list, and then says he is unconvinced of Oswald's guilt.

The production is assisted by a group of young volunteers in sports coats without neckties. They man a slide projector inside the basement auditorium, and presumably the globe-shaped wall lights which illuminate a startling red decor extending even to the air ducts. In the lobby they hawk a two-record album of Mr. Lane's testimony to the Warren Commission (\$5.95), a summary of his contentions by Bertrand Russell (10 cents), and tickets for his coming debate with Melvin Belli (Orchestra: \$5-\$2.50, Balcony: \$1.50).

Tickets for the regular performance are \$2 (99 cents for "students"), which may be a reasonable price considering it runs three hours and 40 minutes, or 20 minutes short of "King Lear." The best critical comment of the evening was overheard about 11:45—One college boy, enthusiastically, "Well, what do you think of it?" Second college boy, after consideration, "It's too long."

Aside from its interminability, Mr. Lane's performance is passable entertainment. He draws countless titters and occasional guffaws with courtroom histrionics spotlighting the gaucheries of confusion which followed the assassination. He's at perhaps his best recounting his own alleged persecution by authority: "We've found when we want to communicate with the Government, we don't have to call them, we can call anybody."

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But then, the audience may not be too hard to please. Its age level is young, and its comments and questions reveal an overt sympathy with Mr. Lane's cause.

So it hoots delight when he denounces the Warren Commission as "five Republicans and two Dixiecrat racists." It quickly accepts the inferences that since Life magazine rather clumsily retouched Oswald's photo, he must be innocent, that if witnesses contradict each other there must be a conspiracy.

After a couple hours of such allusions, the advocate gets to the crux of his case: Some witnesses thought the sound of shots came from in front of the Presidential car, and one of the physicians who gave emergency treatment speculated a bullet may have entered the front of the throat. Contrary conclusions from the autopsy and ballistics tests should be ignored, he indicates, because, of course, the tests were done under Government direction.

The title of the lecture is "Who Killed Kennedy?" A fair question, but it is one Mr. Lane declines to answer even when it's put to him in his own words. "Are you kidding?" he replies, adding he doesn't indulge in speculation. It's perhaps worth noting, though, that he closes the formal part of the lecture by discoursing on the "climate" in Dallas. He shows an anti-Kennedy advertisement from a Dallas paper just before the assassination. It's surrounded by a bold outline which Mr. Lane describes as "black mourning border."

After listening all evening to Mr. Lane's excerpts from the then unpublished Warren report's 800-odd pages, one young listener was moved to ask, in effect, how such prominent citizens could produce such an "imbecilic" document. With an air of finality, the lecturer replied, "I can't understand it."

Mr. Lane makes it abundantly clear that, far from silencing him, the report will give him a handy target. Some of his listeners may agree. But if other Americans have lingering doubts that the report is accurate, such doubts might be dispelled by a visit to a Mark Lane lecture.

—ROBERT L. BARTLEY