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Wild Flow of Rumors

WASHINGTON — On April 15, 101 years ago, William Pitt Fessenden, newly-elected U.S. Senator from Maine, stood in the New York Customs House and harangued a grieving and angry crowd. "We will hang Jeff Davis!" he cried.

This man was giving voice to what the New York Herald called "an ominous muttering in the streets."

FESSENDEN spoke on the morning that Abraham Lincoln died from an assassin's bullet. And he spoke from the false assumption that the President had fallen victim to a plot that was hatched at the very top of the Confederacy.

The "mutterings in the street" continued for months and even years as imaginative citizens, enterprising newsmen and a variety of publicity-seekers popped up with new theories and explanations as to who did what to whom, and why.

A lot of people note the rumors, the suspicions, the theories, the "big plot" charges about the assassination of President Kennedy and mumble that history is repeating itself.

But we cannot blame history for the "ominous mutterings in our streets" or in our bookstores or newspaper city rooms. The simple fact is that human nature has not changed; so we may have to resign ourselves to at least a generation of noise from those who always know how to capitalize on a great tragedy.

Suspicion is an acid that eats at the bowels of a nation. It was precisely to

erase the suspicion, the rumors that would weaken American unity and destroy the country's reputation abroad that the Warren Commission was established.

What painful irony that the commission report itself has given rise to so much controversy.

I, for one, say nonsense to all this morbid speculation. The Kennedy clan has closeness and money. And if the Kennedys had the vaguest notion that the "real assassin" and other "plotters" were at large, they would long ago have begun a massive private investigation.

Life magazine sees a "reasonable doubt" that Oswald acted alone and it, among others, wants to reopen the case. Life's doubts arise from an analysis of an amateur motion picture taken of the shooting. I found the rebuttal by Arlen Specter, a lawyer who handled the Warren Commission's investigation of the shooting, more convincing than Life's presentation of its own theory.

BUT THE simple fact is that both Specter and Life are dealing with fractions of seconds, ballistic theories, medical data and assumptions about human reactions that merely create issues that can never be resolved simply by "reopening" the investigation.

Unless someone has some new evidence that goes beyond split-second nit-picking and 007 mumbo-jumbo, the case should stay closed.