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A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE BUFFS

JOSIAH THOMPSON is an assistant professor of philosophy at Haverford College, near Philadelphia. He graduated from Yale, Phi Beta Kappa, ten years ago; served two years as a naval officer (in 1958, when the Marines landed in Lebanon, he commanded the frogman detachment charged with beach reconnaissance); spent a year in Denmark, doing research in the works of the philosopher who has become his specialty, Søren Kierkegaard; and returned to Yale to complete his doctorate. At Haverford, he teaches courses in the Philosophy of Existence and the Phenomenology of Existence, plus an introductory philosophy course; his dissertation, a study of Kierkegaard called "The Lonely Labyrinth," is scheduled to be published by a university press this year. A boyish-looking young man whose friends call him Tink, he lives on the top floor of an old house on the Haverford campus with a wife, two small children, and perhaps the only complete set of Kierkegaard first editions in the United States. He is an authority on the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Thompson has learned to use an Abney level, a tool valuable in measuring angles, including the trajectories of bullets, and he has gone to Dallas, stood on Elm Street, early on Sunday morning when the traffic is light, and measured the angle from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository. Like many other academics, he has published a letter in the *New York Review of Books* that both commented on a review and displayed a vast and esoteric knowledge; in his case, the comment was on a review of assassination books by Richard Popkin, another philosophy professor and lay authority on the assassination, and the knowledge displayed was of pathology and ballistics as they relate to the course and impact of a 6.5-millimetre bullet. Although his interest in firearms had never extended past what he was required to learn in the Navy, he now owns a display board of the various types of bullets that could have theoretically been used in the assassination, and a rifle of the type Oswald was said to have used, so that he can personally get some idea of how its bolt operates. He may refer casually to the frames of amateur motion pictures taken during the assassination as "Zapruder 313" or "Nix 24," and he sometimes calls the Texas School Book Depository the T.S.B.D. He is conversant with the technicalities of photographic development and re-

finement. "It's just like scholarship," he said recently. "There are good scholars and bad scholars. There are even analytical scholars and inductive scholars. But the marvellous thing about it is that there are no credentials. There's no Ph.D. in the assassination. It's pure scholarship. You have to make your own credentials."

Thompson is quick to point out that in the community of assassination scholars he is a newcomer; he has been working on the case steadily for only a little over a year, which means that he is far from what the others sometimes call "a first-generation critic." The first-generation critics began to devote most of their spare time to the assassination on November 22, 1963. Within a few weeks, Vincent Salandria, a lawyer in Philadelphia, had built a file of newspaper stories that contained references to any police agencies that had been involved. Raymond Marcus—who lives in Los Angeles and was, at the time of the assassination, running a small business for the distribution of "Keep off the Grass" and other household signs to retail stores—began a newspaper file to keep track of the changing theories about where the bullets came from. Anything that appeared about the assassination in the *New York Times*, among other papers, was being saved by Marjorie Field, the wife of a prosperous Beverly Hills stockbroker, and by Sylvia Meagher, a researcher at the World Health Organization in New York. By the first

week in February, Shirley Martin, a housewife who then lived in Hominy, Oklahoma, had driven to Dallas with her four children to interview witnesses. Lillian Castellano, a Los Angeles bookkeeper who thought that reports on the wounds indicated that the President must have been hit from the front, had studied a picture of the Dealey Plaza area, discovered what seemed to be a strategically placed storm drain in front of the motorcade, and called that fact to the attention of a local news commentator, the *Los Angeles Times*, the Warren Commission, and anyone else she could think of who might be investigating what had happened.

Thompson, who was in Yale graduate school at the time, had his own doubts in the first days after the assassination—they were brought on by more or less the same aspects of the case that bothered the other critics—and, briefly, he was even moved to act on them. "The first flash over the radio was that Oswald was caught and seemed to be a left-winger—in Dallas! It sounded crazy. We went to a friend's house that Saturday night, and he said, 'Oswald will never live to stand trial.' And then we drove down to Washington on Sunday, to go through the Capitol Rotunda, and we heard the news about Ruby on the car radio. There was a mixture of frustration and anger and despair. So many people in this long, quiet line had the same feeling. We all thought, 'It's almost going to break. This is just too blatant and obvious. There are bright newsmen working on this thing.' Well, of course, it didn't break. Then, on Wednesday, the *New York Times* published an article based on an interview with one of the Dallas doctors that said quite clearly that there was an entry hole in the front of the President's throat. The same day, *Life* came out with some frames of the Zapruder film, and from those it was quite obvious that at the time of the shooting the President was facing away from the Book Depository building. So, with some trepidation, with *Life* in one hot little hand and the *New York Times* in the other hot little hand, I traipsed over to the F.B.I. office in New Haven, and, in an embarrassed way, said, 'Look, could I see an F.B.I. agent?' They were playing 'The F.B.I. in Peace and War,' of course—very polite. 'Let me take all of this down.' 'Thank you very much for coming in.' 'I'm sure they must have died laughing after I left.'

Thompson—figuring he had done





"Why couldn't I have married a take-charge guy!"

what he could, however embarrassing it had been—turned his attention back to his dissertation and his teaching. His doubts were not assuaged by the Warren Commission's Report, and he did try to keep up with what was being written about the assassination. He even pursued the investigation himself for a while, doing research in the Yale Library after the Commission had released the twenty-six volumes of testimony and exhibits upon which it had based its conclusions. But in time he found that he was more interested in opposing the war in Vietnam than in opposing the Warren Report. Then, last spring, Thompson and some other Haverford faculty members were arrested during a demonstration against the war, and the lawyer asked by the American Civil Liberties Union to arrange their release was Vincent Salandria. Thompson had read and admired a rather technical article Salandria had published in *Liberation* challenging the Warren Commission's conclusion that

all the bullets fired at the President had been fired by one gunman. Encouraged by his meeting with Salandria, Thompson decided he might have time during the summer to go to the National Archives for a more systematic investigation. That investigation led to a manuscript that will eventually be published as a book, and the book contract led to an arrangement to be a consultant to *Life* magazine in its assassination research. Since the day he met Salandria, Thompson says, "I have never fallen asleep at night without thinking, in those last moments before you fall asleep, about where the hell those bullets came from."

WHEN the Warren Report was published, some ten months after the assassination, most Americans seemed to accept its conclusions, most editorialists praised it for its thoroughness and clarity, one or two reviewers criticized it as taking the form of a brief for the prosecution, and perhaps a dozen obscure citizens, unaware of each

other's existence, began to pore over it to prove that it was wrong. Eventually, of course, critical books were written on the Report by professional journalists such as Léo Sauvage, an American correspondent for *Le Figaro*, and Sylvan Fox, the former city editor of the *World-Telegram & Sun*; Mark Lane, the author of "Rush to Judgment," and Harold Weisberg, the author of "Whitewash" and "Whitewash II," became more or less full-time professional critics; Edward Jay Epstein, whose book on the alleged bungling of the Warren Commission investigation, "Inquest," is generally considered the single greatest contribution to making criticism of the Report respectable, entered the field through the orthodox routine of scholarship—in order to earn a Master's degree by analyzing the workings of a governmental commission; and James Garrison, operating on the premise that the Warren Commission failed to fulfill its duties, launched an investigation of his own as district attorney of New Orleans. But in the two and a half years between the assassination and the publication of Epstein's book, most of the hours spent examining the official version of the President's

murder were spent by people who had no professional reason for their interest and no plans to make a full-time career out of criticizing the Warren Report. They tend to refer to themselves (and the professionals) as "investigators" or "researchers" or, most often, "critics." They are also known as "assassination buffs."

The buffs were never alone in their doubts. A Gallup Poll taken the week of the assassination indicated that only twenty-nine per cent of the American people believed that the President was killed by Oswald acting alone; even in the days just after the Warren Report was published, a Harris Survey showed that thirty-one per cent believed that Oswald had acted with accomplices. But of the millions of Americans who doubted the official version, only about a dozen felt strongly enough to try to prove that it was incorrect. Most people were willing to go along with the Warren Report, which, after all, had been produced by a distin-

guished commission with all of the resources of the government at its disposal. Even before the Report was published, an aura of unanimous acceptance had grown up around the official version of what had happened in Dallas, and most Americans did not even want to listen to any theories that contradicted it. Most of the assassination buffs, even those with a large circle of friends, suffered for at least a while from the special kind of loneliness that comes from being obsessed by something that nobody else seems to care about. "I thought I was the only one in the world who had these doubts," Mrs. Castellano recalled recently. "The first year, thinking I was alone, it was terrible." Mrs. Field eventually won over her husband and children, but not her friends; one of Salandria's friends began saying that Salandria had lost his mind. Then, gradually, the buffs began to discover each other. Mrs. Field found out about Mrs. Meagher through writing the instructor of a course on the Warren Report that Mrs. Meagher had taken at the New School; she had discovered Ray Marcus and Mrs. Castellano through an appearance by Lane in Los Angeles. Salandria came to light through the piece in *Liberation*. He immediately received excited letters from other critics; David Lifton, a Los Angeles buff who thought he had made a discovery that supported Salandria's theories, could not wait for the mails and phoned at two in the morning from California. At one point, when Mrs. Field stopped off in New York on the way to Europe, Mrs. Meagher was able to gather together half a dozen critics to meet her. In the days before what Mrs. Meagher has called "the dramatic transition from taboo to dialogue," the discovery that they were not alone struck most of the buffs as monumental. They finally had somebody to talk to.

The buffs soon established an informal but busy network for pooling information, decrying the indiffer-

ence of the public, and cheering each other up. Their discussions are often rather technical. Assassination buffs sometimes speak of Lillian Castellano's most important contribution being her evidence that "the Willis picture lines up with Zapruder 202 and not Zapruder 210," and it is not uncommon to hear somebody say, "We had a friendly argument about Frame 237." There are a dozen ways of discussing the limitations that the Zapruder film places on the number of shots that could be fired from the rifle found in the Texas School Book Depository. David Lifton—an energetic young man who studied engineering physics at Cornell and has been in and out of the U.C.L.A. graduate school of engineering, as his investigation of the assassination allows—likes to speak in terms of "constraints." He once reacted to a piece of news along the network by saying, "Holy mackerel! They've broken the forty-two-frame constraint!" The buffs toss around the names of assassination witnesses and minor Dallas officials as casually as small boys discuss obscure baseball players. They can all furnish a minute description of "399"—the bullet that was said to have hit both Kennedy

and Governor John Connally and is officially called Commission Exhibit No. 399. Marcus has written a seventy-seven-page monograph on the subject. In speaking of each other's work, they often use the same terms that are heard among research scientists—mentioning that some discovery is "in the literature" or that somebody has done "solid work in that area."

Although some of the buffs travelled to Dallas—and some, sooner or later, to Washington to examine the exhibits and documents turned over to the National Archives—most of them have found enough to do in their own homes. They can study many of the documents at the National Archives by sending for copies, and they can always use the phone to interview witnesses and each other. They have built their own research libraries, mostly out of newspaper clippings. Marcus constructed an ingenious research device using a copy of a large surveyor's layout map of the Dealey Plaza area that Mrs. Castellano managed to buy from the surveyor who prepared it for the Commission. Marcus's copy of the map, mounted on heavy cardboard, includes marks to indicate the precise location of each eyewitness whose presence can be



"There's old Begley—still marching to a different drummer."

PEASANT

A PRAYER TO THE POWERS OF THIS WORLD

All those years that you ate and changed
And grew under my picture
You saw nothing
It was only when I began to appear
That you said I must vanish

What could I do I thought things were real
Cruel and wise
And came and went in their names
I thought I would wait I was shrewder but you
Were dealing in something else

You were always embarrassed by what fed you
And made distances faster
Than you destroyed them
It bewitched my dreams
Like magazines I took out with the sheep
That helped to empty the hours
I tried to despise you for what you did not
Need to be able to do
If I could do it
Maybe I could have done without you

My contempt for you
You named ignorance and my admiration for you
Servility
When they were among the few things we had in common
Your trash and your poses were what I most appreciated
Just as you did

And the way you were free
Of me
But I fought in your wars
The way you could decide that things were not
And they died
The way you had reasons
Good enough for your time

When God was dying you bought him out
As you were in a position to do
Coming in the pale car through the mud and fresh dung

Unable to find the place though you had been there
Once at least before
Like the doctor
Without a moment to lose
I was somewhere
In the bargain

I was used to standing in the shade of the sky
A survivor
I had nothing you
Could use

I am taking my hands
Into the cleft wood assembled
In dry corners of abandoned barns
Beams being saved
For nothing broken doors pieces of carts
Other shadows have gone in there and
Wait
On hewn feet I follow the hopes of the owls
For a time I will
Drift down from the tool scars in a fine dust
Noticeably before rain in summer
And at the time of the first thaws
And at the sound of your frequent explosions
And when the roofs
Fall it will be a long while
Since anyone could still believe in me
Any more than if I were one of the
Immortals

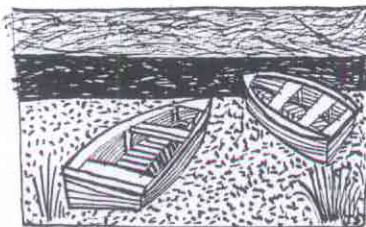
It was you
That made the future
It was yours to take away
I see
Oh thousand gods
Only you are real
It is my shame that you did not
Make me
I am bringing up my children to be you

—W. S. MERWIN

verified through photographs, shaded triangles to indicate the exact scope of each photograph taken, a movable isinglass triangle corresponding to the movements of Zapruder's film, and a model limousine that has a representation of Governor Connally mounted in a way that permits it to swivel to the side. Marcus, an intense man of forty who concentrated almost from the start on the Zapruder film, also built charts of enlargements of Zapruder frames, and spent so much time analyzing them that he was able to tell that two frames had been transposed in the Warren Report because there was an inconsistency in the shadow cast by a little girl's foot in the background. (Lifton had a friend write a disingenuous letter about the transposition to J. Edgar Hoover, who

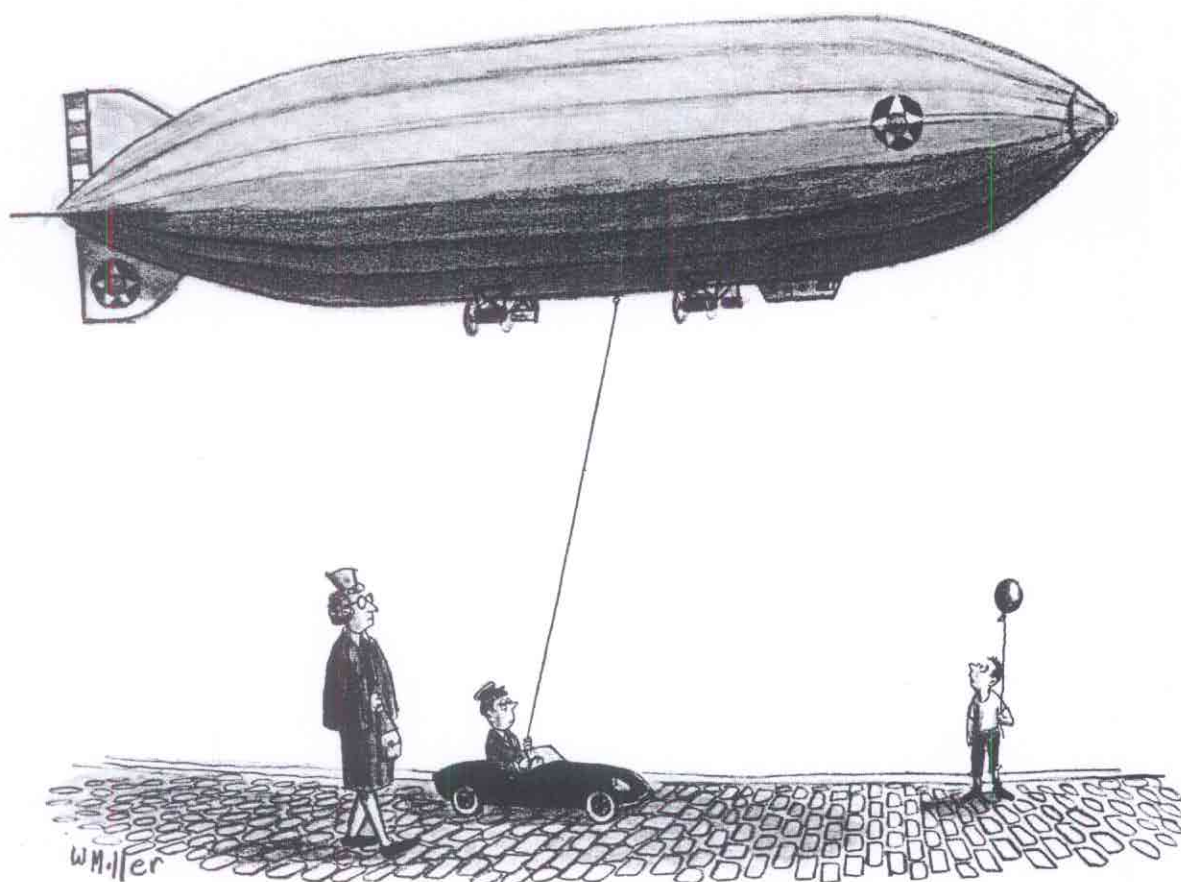
acknowledged the error.) Shadow measuring is not uncommon among the critics. They pass around huge blurred closeups and peer at them for hours trying to ascertain whether a mark on a curb is a stain or a chip, or whether a shape among the trees is a shadow or a gunman.

Of course, what most dramatically magnified the research opportunities of the buffs was the publication of the



Commission's testimony and exhibits, usually referred to as the Twenty-six Volumes. The Twenty-six Volumes contain eighteen thousand pages—the largest body of source material any armchair student of a crime has ever had. Most of the buffs sent for a set immediately, at seventy-six dollars a set. Mrs. Field, whose home in Beverly Hills is rather spacious, has saved some steps by buying an upstairs set and a downstairs set. With the Twenty-six Volumes on hand, Mrs. Meagher—an extraordinarily serious-minded woman who is considered by Thompson (and others) “far and away the best scholar in the field”—has rarely felt the need to pursue her investigation outside the confines of her living room.

For a while, a significant amount of the buffs' research was turned over to



those who seemed to have a better chance to reach the public. Salandria gave Mark Lane the results of his early trips to Dallas; Lifton and Mrs. Field have sent quite a bit of material to Thomas Buchanan, an American who lives in Europe and has written about the assassination in a book and a number of European magazine pieces; and Mrs. Martin sent tapes of her interviews to both Lane and Buchanan. Mrs. Meagher did the index for Epstein's book, and Sauvage and other professionals have depended on her to check over their manuscripts. The buffs have been used as consultants to magazines—first small-circulation left-wing magazines and lately even large-circulation middle-of-the-road magazines. "You can compare this to a company that has a public-relations program and a research-and-development program," Lifton has said. "The two puncture points at the top—what gets public notice—are Lane's book and Epstein's book. The r.-and-d. program is being done by a bunch of amateurs."

Like Thompson, Mrs. Meagher will eventually publish a book of her own on the assassination. She has al-

ready published an index to the Twenty-six Volumes that most of the buffs consider the most awesome accomplishment of the investigation, and she often reacts to magazine articles about the assassination with long, detailed letters to the editor. Other buffs have worked on their own magazine articles or, more often, marshalled their evidence in charts or displays. In addition to constructing charts of the Zapruder frames and writing monographs on them, Marcus, for instance, has attempted to analyze two other key pictures. Because of his suspicion that the well-known photograph of Oswald holding a rifle is a composite, a suspicion based partly on the fact that the shadow of Oswald's nose and the shadow of his body do not fall in the same direction, Marcus has taken dozens of photographs at all hours of the day, in all combinations of shadows; he now has a scrapbook full of pictures of his son and various other subjects standing soberly in his back yard, holding a rifle and squinting into the sun. Marcus has also done what he calls a facial analysis of a blurred image that the Commission says is Billy Lovelady,

a Texas School Book Depository employee, and that some of the buffs think is Oswald. Working on a clear-plastic overleaf, Marcus marked twenty-six points to outline the features on an enlargement of the blurred face; he then did the same on enlarged portraits of Lovelady and Oswald, and compared the results on graph paper. "Whatever I found may be due to the camera angles," Marcus said recently. "It may mean nothing. It's possible that this is completely unscientific. But my answer to people saying 'You're no expert' is 'Where are the experts?'"

ALTHOUGH the assassination buffs are, by and large, people who are sensitive to the possibility of government harassment, none of them complains of being hounded by the F.B.I. or spied upon or persecuted. Even as they persisted in investigating a crime most people were trying to put out of their minds and in questioning the integrity of a panel chosen precisely because its members were so distinguished as to be above question, they received no hostile phone calls or insulting letters. Salandria lost no clients. In-

stead, the buffs experienced a lack of concern that most of them found more maddening than overt hostility—particularly because they seemed to find the least concern among those whom they might have expected to be sympathetic. “If one group was in favor of accepting the Report, or at least letting the matter lie, it was the liberals,” Marcus says. Salandria agrees: “I had all the liberal credentials—SANE, A.C.L.U., and all that. But the idea that I should be undertaking to denigrate a report prepared and endorsed and presided over by Earl Warren scared my liberal friends. Some of them got very panicky and some of them departed under the strain.” Salandria believes that the reluctance of liberals to listen to arguments against the Report—a reluctance he still finds today—is based on more than merely the desire to protect a man who has so often been attacked from the right for his liberalism. “I think that this assassination in many ways provides a mirror for this society and the roles of different groups in this society,” Salandria says. “The liberal—with whom I felt closely identified—really wasn’t what he purported to be. What he purported to be was someone who wanted to mollify the misery in this society, and alter the society so that it would become freer, more responsive to the needs of the underdog, more egalitarian, and perhaps more peaceful. But as a consequence of this assassination, I see the liberal as different. I see him as being more interested in protecting government, in even apologizing for government, surrendering the skepticism in favor of support for power—in, I think, an honest belief that the governmental power provided is good governmental power and that good governmental power can be



“Baa, baa, black sheep, have you any wool?”



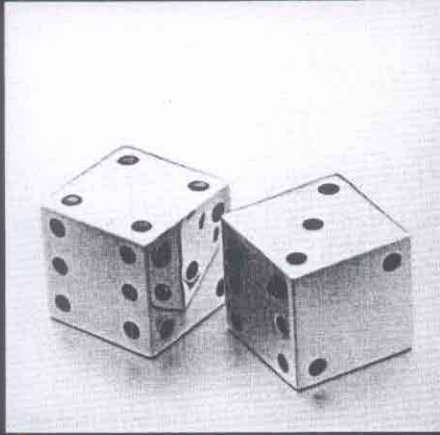
“Yes, sir, yes, sir, three bags full.”

translated to mean power exercised by good men, good men translated to mean liberal men. That these good men could do no wrong is a kind of religious feeling that the liberal has, and therefore, if he is to serve society, he is not to be skeptical of governmental power, not to question authority exercised by good men in a good direction, but rather to accommodate himself and his ideas to this power, and protect it against ‘unwarranted attacks.’ Any attack on this Commission was ‘unwarranted.’”

Salandria, a short, quick-moving man of thirty-nine, values his independence—he runs his own law practice in Philadelphia from an office in his own house—and he is not, by nature, an accommodator. “If the government says ‘black,’ Vince figures ‘white,’” Thompson once said of him, fondly. “He’s a marvellously skeptical man.” In talking about the assassination, which is almost all he talks about, Salandria finds himself more at ease with conservatives than with those who share his political beliefs. “I have found many honest conservatives,” he says. “You confront them with the possibility of governmental wrongdoing and they do not flare at you, in liberal fashion. They will ask you what you have to offer by way of evidence, and they will listen to you. They are not gullible, but they will not attack you for a suggestion that something could be wrong.” Salandria, who does more public speaking than most of the buffs, rarely appears before a liberal audience, but he is accustomed to being received enthusiastically by such organizations as the North Penn Young Republican Club, the Philadelphia County Dental Society, and the Lansdale Junior Chamber of Commerce Women’s Club.

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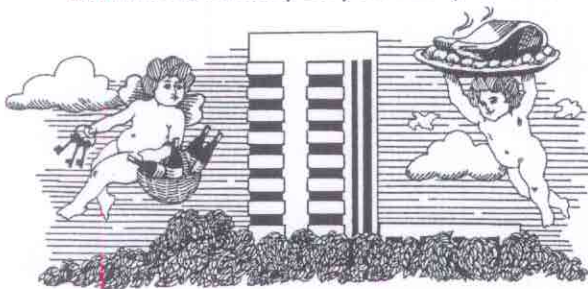
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ter, Salandria addressed the Omega Club, a small group of conservative lawyers that meets regularly at the Adelphia Hotel, in downtown Philadelphia, for lunch. The meeting was held in a private dining room off the hotel's coffee shop, and about fifteen members were present. They were having orange sherbet and coffee and discussing the problem of Communist infiltration in the Catholic colleges of the Philadelphia area when Salandria arrived. He was immediately introduced by the chairman, who said, "The main point I want to bring out is that he's highly respected for his ability and everyone regards him as a man of great integrity."

Salandria made a few opening comments about being happy to return to Omega—it had been the first organization to ask him to speak after he had first published his doubts in the Philadelphia *Legal Intelligencer*, the city's law journal—and about having published articles in magazines that the members had assured him were Communist fronts. "But I have developed a healthy respect for the conservative mind in the United States," he said. "My hope for breaking this case comes not from the left wing and not from the liberals and not from the government but from independent Americans who are steeped in a heritage that bespeaks of a concern about governmental power—excessive governmental power."

"Amen," somebody said.

Salandria explained that he had made a specialty of the "shots, trajectories, and wounds of the assassination," and he launched into a straightforward account of the evidence. He spoke precisely of angles of descent, the damage caused by each bullet, and the condition of the bullets. At one point he drew out a large chart that had an outline of the President's body as seen in Zapruder Frame 316 superimposed on an enlargement of Zapruder Frame 313—a demonstration of his contention that the President's body snapped back and to the left when hit by the fatal bullet—and at another point he took off his jacket so he could better demonstrate the spot at which the first bullet was said to have entered the President's back. The lawyers were attentive. Occasionally, they nodded their understanding of what Salandria was talking about. When Salandria had finished his speech and called for questions, a man asked why J. Edgar Hoover had stated his belief in the Commission's findings if any doubt existed, and Salandria quoted a number of documents to demonstrate that the F.B.I. itself had con-

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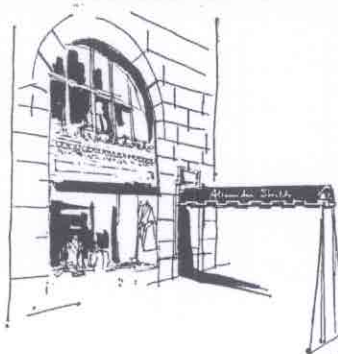
tradicted the Report. There were no other questions that reflected any doubt about Salandria's contention that the Commission's version of the assassination was "patently wrong." When Salandria said, "I urge upon you that our President was, in fact, killed by a team of skilled professional assassins," two or three men nodded and one man down the table whispered, "Communists." The presence of a conspiracy seemed to be taken for granted; the questions were about who was in the conspiracy. There was strong sentiment for suspecting the Communists—one man noted that the *Worker* had suggested a commission headed by Warren before one was actually announced, and another asked Salandria if there were any known Communists on the Commission—but, for a while, nobody seemed to object to Salandria's theory that the conspirators were "neither left nor right" but "elements whose purpose was to perpetuate the Cold War when Kennedy was trying to arrive at an accommodation." Reading some items from the *Times* of that morning about Vietnam, Salandria attempted to show that the deep American involvement in the war made no sense economically, politically, legally, or morally—"no sense, unless you trace it back to the assassination." The lawyers seemed to accept that theory rather calmly. Then, suddenly, one man, almost shouting, said, "This thing boils down to a supposed attempt to frame the right-wing military! This is the international socialist propaganda line that hasn't changed in over a hundred years!" Everybody seemed to shout at once, but after Salandria denied the charge, and answered one or two more questions about why he did not think the Communists were involved, the subject seemed forgotten. The Omega members listened respectfully as Salandria answered polite questions about how the Commission worked and why the conspirators chose the Dallas motorcade as a time to murder the President. When the chairman got up to close the meeting, Salandria received enthusiastic applause, and several members stayed around to compliment him further.

THE assassination buffs do not always find their criticism of the Warren Report received with compliments; they are used to being challenged by people they sometimes call the counter-critics. It is often said that the buffs fail to realize that dozens of inconsistencies can be found in the most open-and-shut case for the prosecution, that they tend to fit all events into a

conspiratorial pattern without allowing for coincidence, and that they are sometimes carried away by their enmity toward the Establishment. The buffs, of course, vary in acuteness, but it is true, for instance, that many of them, like most Americans, often credit the printed word as it appears in newspapers with more authority than it deserves and tend to interpret such institutions as magazines and television networks too much in terms of monolithic design and not enough in terms of human caprice. "Most of these people are not trained as lawyers, and that makes a big difference," Wesley J. Liebler, a lawyer who worked for the Commission and has often debated with various critics, said not long ago. "For instance, they fail to distinguish between different types of evidence, and they'll put as much value in the recollection of a witness as in a scientific report." It is not unusual for a buff to move easily from an explanation of why some meticulous measurements are evidence that the President was shot from the front to an explanation of why some of the President's speeches in the months before he went to Dallas are evidence that the murder was carried out by those in the government who wanted to prevent a change in the American position on the Cold War.

Even counter-critics agree, however, that the buffs can be quite effective when picking apart the conclusions of the Warren Report. (There is general agreement among assassination buffs that the Report was, in Marcus's words, "the most massively fraudulent document ever foisted on a free society," although they have various opinions as to how aware the commissioners were of the fraud, and one or two of them have some doubts about whether this is a free society.) Epstein—who is considered a turncoat by the buffs because he has stated that Oswald was probably guilty—says, "The thing about these people is that they're honest. Although some of them are kind of strange. Somebody like Lane will distort things, but the buffs can be trusted on the facts, even though some of their conclusions are silly. Lying would ruin the game for them. Sylvia Meagher's index of the Twenty-six Volumes might be one of the rare examples of a polemical index, but that's more than the Commission provided, and I found it useful." Liebler has said, "They fit facts into this kind of strange framework, but, on the fact-observation level, some of these people are very good; sometimes they have

Alexander Shields



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noticed facts that other people haven't noticed."

Some of the arguments that public figures and respectable magazines have put forward for holding a new investigation of the assassination are those that were published by the buffs a long time ago—such as the physical evidence Salandria presented in his *Liberation* piece for believing that more than one gunman could have been involved—but in the public mind the buffs are still associated more with demonology than with scholarship. Even articles that basically agree with their position on the Warren Report ordinarily dismiss the buffs in a sentence or two as crackpots or conspiracy-mongers, and then begin the next sentence "But even reasonable people..." If there is suspicion among reasonable people about the conclusions of the Warren Report, there seems to be equal suspicion about those who suggest alternate conclusions that involve complicated conspiracies, and, as it happens, most of the buffs believe that President Kennedy's murder was the result of a high-level plot. Almost all of them believe that the assassination and the American policy in Vietnam are connected. Almost all of them think that Oswald probably did not fire a rifle at the President, and that he was, in one way or another, an employee of the F.B.I. or the C.I.A. or some other governmental agency whose operatives could have arranged to set him up for the frame. In general, they look to Garrison's investigation for corroboration of their views.

The buffs say that their plot theories are speculation, not to be confused with the careful research they present of factual inconsistencies in the Warren Commission's version of the events. But some of them tend to blur the difference, finding listeners more interested in the idea of C.I.A. manipulations than in measurements of bullet angles. Several buffs eventually came to believe that they had to present some alternate "models" of the assassination that might account for the known facts more logically than the Warren Report did—and some see the models as including not only how the assassination was carried out but who might have had reason to order it. Some of the more thoughtful buffs, aware of the loss of credibility that comes with plot theories, have always favored keeping speculation to a minimum. Although Mrs. Meagher's recent article in the *Minority of One* presents examples from the Twenty-six Volumes of what she believes to be State Department fa-

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voritism toward Oswald, she does not speculate on the reason for the favoritism. On the theory that even a model that limits itself to how the assassination was carried out can bring a loss of credibility to the buffs if it seems too extreme, a few buffs prevailed upon David Lifton a year or so ago not to publicize his theory that the grassy knoll in Dealey Plaza was hollowed out for the assassination in a paramilitary operation that included the use of artificial trees.

WHEN expertise on the assassination changed from a bond among lonely zealots to a commodity somewhat in demand, the fellowship among the buffs did not survive completely intact. Although some critics continued to exchange information as freely as they ever did, others became more cautious. There have been one or two complaints about a critic's publishing information he acquired from someone else and neglecting to mention the source. Gradually, as the members of the faithful emerged as individuals, each buff decided which people he could work with and whose research he found reliable. There are conflicting opinions among them about the case and about those involved. Mrs. Martin, for instance, is the most fervent admirer of John Kennedy among the buffs; she is probably the only one whose house contains more books about Kennedy's life than about his death, and she frankly idolizes the Kennedy family. Although she has worked with and respected critics she refers to as "my leftist friends," she is often at odds with them because of their criticism of the role of the Kennedy family in the investigation or because of her recollection that the far left subjected Kennedy to as much abuse as the far right. All of the critics of the Warren Report are still kept together to some extent by having common enemies—the Commission's lawyers, Epstein, most members of what they tend to call "the Establishment press"—and by being attacked as a group concerning their motives.

The buffs react rather strongly to the accusation that, whatever the standards of their research, they are being morbid or unpatriotic or exploitative in engaging in it. A couple of the buffs have used pseudonyms in magazine articles, but most of them see nothing wrong with taking credit for the work they have done—noting occasionally that respectable journalists would not be hesitating to take credit for it if they had done their jobs. Some buffs will ac-

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cept no money for anything they do, but most of them see nothing wrong with making back through articles or books some of the money they have invested in photostats, telephone bills, time taken out from other work, and travel. Most of the amateur critics look upon their work as a financial sacrifice in one way or another, and at least one—Salandria—qualifies as an angel of the investigation as well as a participant. But they are quick to defend anyone who has found criticism of the assassination to be profitable. "It's only when you show some skepticism that you're a profiteer," Mrs. Meagher says. "Gerald Ford put out a book, after serving on the Commission, and I haven't heard one voice lifted in criticism of him. I had to buy it, on top of all the other things I had to buy from my government, which conducted this whole investigation, this fraud, this insult to ordinary intelligence, with our tax money. I think if the government is engaged in something evil, it is the duty of any person with concern for his country to work against it, and I don't think there is anything remotely illegal or immoral about it. I have no apologies whatsoever to make for my work on this case. It's been motivated by a very simple thing—a concern for justice. And I hope we are not at the point of having to surrender any regard for justice so that we won't be called unpatriotic, or profiteers, or any other ugly words."

The critics still try to maintain a relatively united front in public. In her review of Lane's book in *Studies on the Left*, Mrs. Meagher wrote, "Perhaps there is some slanting—some shading—but those who are first to make the charge were strangely undisturbed by the blatant slanting that deforms the Warren Report." Most buffs accompany any criticism they have of Lane's method with the explanation that he is an admitted advocate rather than an objective researcher, and a few of them were upset with Sauvage for writing of Lane that "his unsupported statements, like the 'scientific' arguments of Thomas Buchanan... offered exactly the kind of samples needed by Dallas to discredit the critics of its police and its District Attorney." One or two buffs will say that the early books by Buchanan and Joachim Joestyn were more or less worthless, but it is more usual for a buff to explain that Buchanan had to deal in speculation, because at the time of his writing it happened that few facts were available.

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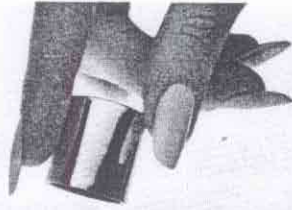
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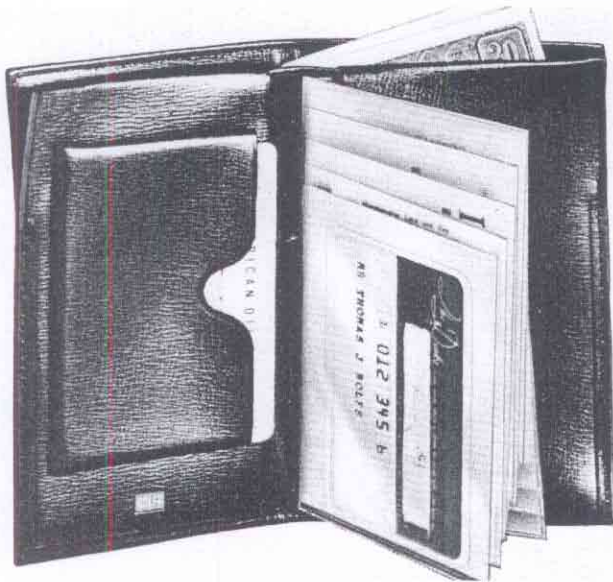
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it is not maintained as passionately as it once was. (Work in research is also less passionate, partly because many of the buffs are waiting to see just what Garrison has.) Mrs. Field and Ray Marcus often talk on the phone two or three times a day. Mrs. Field and Mrs. Meagher are still in constant communication. Until recently, Salandria and Thompson talked things over several times a week, although they had decided at one point that they could not collaborate formally because they disagree on the origin of the President's throat wound. Not long ago, a high-school teacher from Berkeley wrote Richard Popkin, who was in Israel, about a lead that might be investigated. Popkin included the information in a letter to a classics professor at Haverford who had been sending him newspaper clippings during his stay abroad. The classics professor, a friend of Thompson's, reported the information to Thompson, who discussed it with Salandria, and together they decided it might best be checked by a journalist who happened to be working on that aspect of the case. "That's typical of how it works," Thompson said. "Of course, the frustration of the thing is that you don't really have the resources to do it right. With the same kind of resources the government had on this, maybe you could wrap it up. You wouldn't have to rely on such fortuitous circumstances that this lead would only come because of a lucky break."

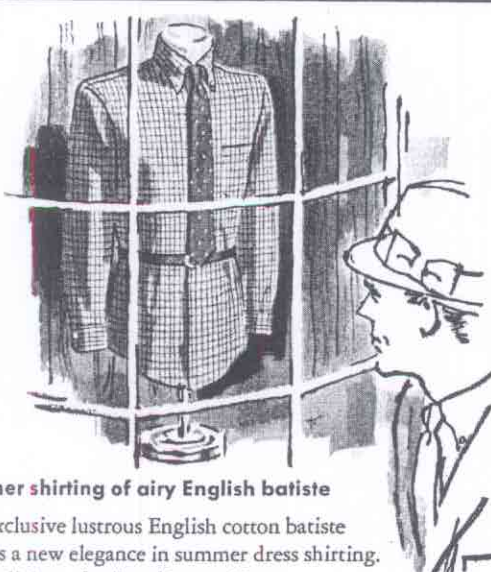
THE buffs' difficulty in separating their suspicions about a plot from their careful analysis of the hard evidence may stem partly from the fact that, by and large, the suspicions came first. Most of the buffs suspected the announced version of what had happened before any mention at all was made of precisely how the President and the Governor were wounded and where the shots came from; the details that followed only provided some contradictions that confirmed their initial doubts. (A few of them later discovered that whatever contradiction it was they had first seized on had an innocent explanation after all, but by that time they had discovered other contradictions.) Mrs. Castellano, who says she was first struck by the inconsistency between the wounds and the position of the accused assassin, felt the matter was significant partly because of her belief that thorough photographs of the area were being withheld from the public. The doubts of most critics began with the announcement that the President

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had been killed by a lone leftist. They thought the combination of a left-wing assassin in a right-wing city was, in Mrs. Field's words, "just too pat," and they never believed that Oswald was simply a crackpot. The same facts about Oswald's past that convinced many Americans that he was a sick man who happened to fasten onto the left made Salandria suspect that he was an *agent provocateur*. Any suspicions about Oswald's role were of course multiplied by his violent death, but even before Ruby entered the Dallas police station, some of the buffs were outraged at what seemed a presumption of guilt without the formalities of a trial. Mrs. Field says, "I saw Oswald on TV, being paraded through the station back and forth like an animal, and they asked him why he killed the President and he said, 'I didn't kill anyone.' I believed him. I really didn't have anything to go on then, but I was convinced that it was a political conspiracy and I was convinced that Oswald was not the assassin. I'll tell you another thing: If one man can be picked off the street and arrested and jailed for two murders he didn't commit, then not one of us is safe. I saw one lawyer after another turn his back on the deprivation of every basic human right. One or two attorneys spoke out, but where were all the other lawyers in this country? Where was the press in this country—swallowing this whole thing and not raising its voice?"

The suspicions of two or three of the women who were drawn to the investigation were mixed with deep feelings for those involved. Mrs. Castellano—a quiet woman with gray hair who still speaks with the accent of Dallas, where she was born—had never worked on a political campaign before 1960, when she worked for John Kennedy in her neighborhood in Los Angeles. "I was proud of him," she said not long ago. "He had an air about him. I was so proud that he was the President." Mrs. Martin, who was made suspicious by the juxtaposition of Dallas and a Marxist assassin, was pulled toward the case not only by her feelings for Kennedy but also by her sympathy for the family of the man who was said to have killed him; her first real involvement came when she found herself phoning Marguerite Oswald to assure her that someone else believed in her son's innocence. Mrs. Martin, who now lives in Owasso, a small town outside of Tulsa, said recently, "I'm deeply disturbed when I see something done an injustice to—Lee Harvey Oswald, a little dog, chil-

dren in Vietnam, it doesn't make any difference." (She manages to find room for twelve dogs that were once strays or residents of the Tulsa pound, she and her husband have adopted an American Indian boy, and she is currently less interested in the assassination than in trying to assist a program to bring Vietnamese children who have been burned by napalm to America for treatment.)

"I think that once people start one of the things that keep them going is the puzzle," Thompson says. "You never start with the intention of going all the way—at least I never did—but you keep finding pieces and putting them together. You make progress all the time." The investigation of the assassination has provided the buffs with the same kind of absorption they would find in any other puzzle-solving; Mrs. Meagher, who lives by herself in Manhattan and used to spend much of her spare time at the ballet, doubts if she would have become so involved with the Twenty-six Volumes if she had not felt the loneliness brought on by some deaths in her immediate family. "With somebody like Sylvia Meagher, reason is the equalizer," Thompson says. "It's like the six-gun in the old West. The only weapon is your own mind, and you can actually break the case."

Most buffs remain excited by the possibility of breaking the case—finding a piece of evidence that the public and press could not ignore. They are constantly coming across something like a new process for clarifying photographs or a new connection between some of the people involved; for a while Salandria and Thompson spent most of their time investigating a man they believed to be the killer of Officer Tippit. Lifton gave up the case completely at one point and then returned because he thought he was on the verge of a breakthrough. Although Thompson has occasionally stepped back and pondered on how bizarre it is that he is investigating the murder of the President of the United States, more or less as an avocation, the level at which the case has to be discussed—its effect on powerful men and powerful nations, for instance—seems to generate an excitement of its own for many buffs. Most of them are proud of knowing more about such a case than anyone else—they sometimes speak of each other as recognized critics—and they seem constantly aware of the place in history reserved for whoever solves the puzzle. The buffs speak of history a good deal, and the

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case most often mentioned when comparisons come up is not any of the previous assassinations but the case of Alfred Dreyfus.

ALTHOUGH few of the buffs would deny harboring a desire to be the hero who solves the crime of the century, most of them would probably not still be interested in the case if the government had not claimed to have solved it already. Many of the buffs are, like Salandria, people who suspect not only what the government says about Oswald but what it says about almost anything. The force keeping most of them at their research has been a desire to demonstrate that the official version of the assassination is a lie—not only in order to make it possible for the truth to emerge but also in order to expose the fact that the government has been engaged in what Mrs. Meagher calls "a deliberate, outright, demonstrable fraud." (The fact that the government itself—through the Twenty-six Volumes and the Archives—has been their most useful ally in this quest can strike the buffs as either cheering or ironic. The publication of the Twenty-six Volumes convinced Salandria that those who conspired to kill Kennedy do not have complete control of the government; it led Marcus to remark that "this is still a free country;" and it convinced Mrs. Meagher, who had not made up her mind about the Warren Report until she read the Twenty-six Volumes, that the commissioners did not realize what was in them.) Most of the buffs are people who have been concerned with the veracity of the government for years. They reserve their final scorn for anyone who is not willing to admit the possibility of doctored evidence or a high-level cover-up. Like most Americans, they see the assassination to some extent as a symbolic event, and for them the final acceptance of a lie about the assassination—especially a lie they consider so transparent—would be intolerable. "It would mean that the society was closing up completely," Salandria says. "It would mean that 1984 was with us and our experiment with democracy was ended. I really think this involves the very nature of our society, and that I couldn't live in a society that could pull a swindle of this kind."

For some critics, the Warren Report represents not only the last straw in what they see as a practice of lying but also the best opportunity to change that practice. "I saw in it a sort of climax of believing lying in the past

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twenty years," Marcus said not long ago. "I have felt for a number of years that we've been more wrong than right, that we're headed for disaster—not just a war but a nuclear exchange—and something had to blast us off the track. If I was basically in favor of our foreign policy, I wouldn't be doing this work. But people have believed lies and those lies are going to kill us all. If people become aware of this, maybe they'll start to demand other answers. Maybe they'll ask about the Rosenbergs, Hiss, the whole Cold War. Maybe we can get clean and whole. But if this stays down, there's no hope."

Most—although not all—of the critics of the Warren Report think of themselves as being somewhere on the left politically, and it is often charged that their criticism stems from a refusal to accept the idea that Kennedy was murdered by a leftist rather than by the right-wing extremists of Dallas. This feeling is obviously not totally missing among the buffs, but a desire to prove that the government lied about Oswald, no matter what his politics, is much more relevant to their political outlook. The buffs are in the rare position of being able to exercise a political passion through careful, factual, objective research. "These people are generally hostile to the government and they don't believe a damn thing the government says," Liebler has said. "If the government says that the plane lost was a weather plane, there's nothing they can do to check up on it. But here—with the Twenty-six Volumes—in a finite, specific way, they can actually do something." Lifton—who began his research about a year after the assassination, after attending one of Lane's lectures out of curiosity—says, "I wasn't really interested in politics, although once I was very interested in the philosophy of Ayn Rand, and I'm still a free-enterpriser economically. I really just got interested the same way I was interested in Scouting once, or once ham radio. But I have been affected politically. I was talking to Ray Marcus about Vietnam—it's hard to talk to Ray without talking about Vietnam—and he was saying the newspapers aren't telling the truth about Vietnam. I said, 'I find that hard to believe.' And he said, 'Why do you find it so hard to believe about Vietnam and so easy to believe about the assassination?' I told him that was a pretty good question."

The polls now show that a majority of Americans do not fully believe the conclusions of the Warren Report. A

number of influential people and influential publications have joined what the buffs sometimes permit themselves to call the bandwagon asking for a new investigation. This could mean that most Americans acknowledge that the buffs were at least right to question the Report—giving them a place within the old American tradition of the private citizen pitting his brain against the authorities, thinking that one man can make some difference. But the buffs are not, by and large, people who fit the mold of the American Hero. Most Americans would undoubtedly prefer that the questioning had been done by a square-jawed, young, non-political attorney who happened to notice an inconsistency in the evidence and could not rest until the record was set right. In a society accustomed to putting its trust in organizations and experts, of course, not many square-jawed, young, non-political attorneys are willing to believe that a distinguished governmental commission investigated the murder of the President for eight months and then did not tell the truth about it. Asked not long ago whether he expected many other people to begin investigating the assassination, Marcus said, "Most of them won't be able to get over the hurdle that the autopsy report was falsified."

"This is an obsession," Thompson says. "And happy, typical Americans aren't obsessed. Jack Armstrong isn't obsessed. There's a fantastic way in which the assassination becomes a religious event. There are relics, and scriptures, and even a holy scene—the killing ground. People make pilgrimages to it. And, as in any religious event, what happened there isn't clear; it's ambiguous, surrounded by mystery, uncertain, dubious. I think there is a feeling with some of us that it has to be clarified. It's the symbolic status of it that's important. Somehow, one hopes to clarify one's own situation and one's own society by clarifying this. I think some of us feel that Fortinbras hasn't arrived and that everything is somehow incomplete. And that's what we want: we want Fortinbras to arrive."

—CALVIN TRILLIN

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