

## ASSASSINATION:

## Any Number Can Play

STUDY THE PAST, says the inscription chiseled in stone outside the National Archives on Washington's Pennsylvania Avenue, and rarely have so many amateur scholars followed the command into the dusty reliquary of U.S. history. The well-beaten path leads upstairs to the East Search Room, where, almost any day, a visitor can find one or two instant historians poring over some of the 300 cubic feet of evidence generated by the assassination. The name of the game is: who killed John F. Kennedy? And the answer, for the people disposed to play it, is rarely the simple verdict the Warren commission rendered: Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone.

Three years after the fact, the will to doubt that verdict is stronger and more intractable than ever. Dissent has become a cult with its own true believers—a subculture of assassination buffs who obsessively probe the massive record, swap their findings and publish new and ever more elaborate conspiracy theories. And they have created a growing market: a recent Louis Harris poll showed that three-fifths of the American public doubts the assassination was the work of one man—nearly double the level of two years ago (NEWSWEEK, Oct. 10).

It is a game any number can play, and it was still proliferating last week:

■ Hard-cover sales of "Rush to Judgment," lawyer Mark Lane's defense brief for Oswald, passed 90,000 and kept the book second on The New York Times

nonfiction best-seller list. Edward Jay Epstein's "Inquest," a made-over master's thesis attacking the Warren commission's methods, topped 20,000 and flooded paperback racks with 325,000 just-published copies. Esquire magazine gave Epstein eight pages in its December issue to analyze no fewer than 35 extant theories contradicting the commission's. A New York television station scheduled a three-hour November postmortem starring Lane and other critics of the commission. The foreign press splashed the doubters' accounts, often with we-told-you-so glee. And even London's sober Sunday Times ventured that the Warren report "appears a vulnerable document."

■ Demonologist Penn Jones Jr., the otherwise obscure owner-editor of the tiny (circulation: 765) Midlothian, Texas Mirror, found a bigger, glossier forum in California's Ramparts magazine for the most Byzantine tale to date. By Jones's count, ten persons touched in one way or another by the assassination had met "mysterious deaths"—a catchall term that includes a karate chop, a slit throat, two heart attacks, two auto accidents and the demise by "acute barbiturate and alcohol intoxication" of Hearst columnist Dorothy Kilgallen. Introducing Jones, Ramparts playfully paralleled his theory with that of the death "curse" on those who opened King Tut's tomb. But the magazine gave him twenty pages and a widely reported Washington press conference, at which Jones confidently boosted the count to seventeen and announced: "Those people have been pretty systematically eliminated." (Snorted "Inquest's" Epstein: "This is the way a child thinks—every event must be connected.")

■ There were the first signs of a backlash against the doubters. At UCLA, acting law professor Wesley J. Liebeler—a commission staff alumnus who often played devil's advocate during the inquiry—put 23 students to work weighing the official verdict against the critiques. He sent them first to the 26 volumes of published testimony and exhibits, planned to dispatch them next to the Archives as soon as the commission's hundreds of filing boxes of working papers are declassified in the next 60 days.\* He hopes, too, that the much-debated autopsy photos and X-rays of the dead President will be made available; he shares the prevalent belief that "somebody in the Kennedy family" has them. Liebeler remains convinced that the Warren commission was right,

\*The FBI, the Secret Service and the CIA have already released what material they felt they could to the Archives under standard restrictions covering such considerations as national security, the identities of agents and informants and the protection of innocent persons. The Archives staff is using the same guidelines in sifting the commission's memos and papers. Further reviews of classified material by the FBI, the Secret Service and the CIA are required.

but he feels the widespread doubts demand a down-the-middle review.

And still the search goes on. The 30-foot rows of gray cardboard boxes in which the National Archives keeps the Kennedy data seem endlessly to fascinate the doubters. "There is nothing new or startling there," an ex-commission staffer insists. But still the trickle continues; one or two requests a day for data on a single subject is the Archives' equivalent to a run on a bank. And that, in a society that has never quite closed its books on the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, was hardly surprising. "This," a Warren commission lawyer forecasts dolefully, "will go on for a century or more."

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