

W. Cooper, John Warren  
 Pers. Epstein, Edw. J.  
 Rush to Judgment  
 Inquest  
 45 3-01 Warren Commission

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 The Bookshelf

More Views on the Assassination

John Sherman Cooper, Republican Senator and ex-ambassador, positions himself carefully erect on a sofa, polished shoes together. He jerks his head to the right, staring over his shoulder toward the Senate anteroom's gilded ceiling. He swings his head again, this time looking over his left shoulder.

To a passer-by the Senator's behavior might look strange indeed. But his running commentary to a visitor seated nearby is clear enough: These were the body movements of Texas Gov. John Connally upon hearing the first shot fired at President Kennedy's open car in Dallas. The governor was sitting on a jump seat just in front of the President. And he was struck by one of the two bullets that hit Mr. Kennedy.

Or was he?

Did Longstreet's blunders deny Leo victory at Gettysburg? Should a delayed referee's count have deprived Dempsey of his title in the Tunney fight? The Kennedy assassination as it recedes in time has left just that same residue of doubt which nourishes the endless speculations of Civil War buffs and boxing connoisseurs. There exists now a growing cult of experts on the assassination; people who argue about just how Gov. Connally sat, just where the bullets struck, just how long it takes to work the bolt on Oswald's rifle.

Along with Chief Justice Warren and five other distinguished men, Sen. Cooper is a veteran member of the circle of assassination experts, by virtue of service on the commission appointed to investigate Mr. Kennedy's death. The gruesome lore of the case was circulated widely in October 1964 with publication of the commission's 888-page report naming Lee Harvey Oswald as the unaided killer. This verdict against a Castro-admiring leftist was challenged at the time by only a few Americans—and a good many Europeans—who clung to theories of a right-wing conspiracy.

Now this summer the cult of assassination experts is growing again with publication of two books, "Rush to Judgment" by Mark Lane, and "Inquest" by Edward Jay Epstein. Both attack the Warren Commission's investigation as a sloppy piece of detective work; both seek to shake public acceptance of the single-assassin theory.

It's relatively easy for an author to "raise doubts" about the commission's work by selective emphasis on the plentiful evidence (mainly collected and published by the commission itself in 26 backup volumes) running counter to the case against Oswald. In a widely remarked review of the Epstein book, Richard Goodwin, a former aide to President Kennedy, has suggested that the case be reopened because of the points scored against the commission's work.

The Hard Evidence

When it comes to offering substitute theories about the assassination, however, the anti-commission writers bump against the hard data on which the commission relied. However lamely, these must be gotten around. An incriminating bullet could have been spirited into Parkland Hospital by conspirators and "placed" for the cops to find. A key autopsy report by Navy doctors could have been "changed" by an unscrupulous Chief Justice and his commission cronies. Reviewing the Epstein book, a University of California philosophy professor became so carried away that he decided there had to be two Dallas gunmen, one physically resembling Oswald—and that Oswald himself merely had the assignment of getting caught.

By now the people who know about the "grassy knoll" in Dallas undoubtedly are more numerous than the cult of Civil War buffs who dispute events at the "clump of trees" at Gettysburg. The grassy knoll is the spot near the Texas book depository where Mr. Lane suggests an undiscovered marksman fired at the President's car. The whole point of his first two chapters is to get the gunfire away from the sixth-floor book depository window from which the commission decided all the shots came.

Mr. Lane is an old hand at this; a New York lawyer who sought to act as Oswald's attorney during the investigation, he knows the case thoroughly and has won a wide European following with his conspiracy theories. "Rush to Judgment" is the book version of the courtroom defense Oswald might have received but for the vengeful Jack Ruby.

As a good trial lawyer would, Mr. Lane dwells on testimony of eyewitnesses who thought the shots came from the knoll, mainly ignoring others who heard gunfire from the top of a nearby underpass or from the limousine itself. The testimony of some (but not all) of those who placed the source at the book depository is dissected with all the zest of a bewigged Charles Laughton in an English courtroom movie. Characteristically of the anti-commission books, many of the discrepancies triumphantly described by Mr. Lane were discussed frankly in the pages of the Warren Report itself. For the thorough reader, this takes some of the zing out of Mr. Lane's inside dope.

Gamely the defense lawyer tackles the prosecution's best evidence: Commission Exhibit 399, a bullet judged by ballistics experts to have been fired from Oswald's Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, found in the book depository. The bullet was discovered on a stretcher at Parkland Hospital. (Whether the stretcher had carried President Kennedy or Gov. Connally is an exhausting side-argument the experts chew on.) How to absolve Oswald? The stretchers were unguarded,