

Some Warren Commission stuff.....

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A CRUEL AND SHOCKING ACT

The Secret History of the Kennedy Assassination

Philip Shenon

New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2013

Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, 625 pps.

The subtitle is misleading. It should read, more correctly, *The Secret History of the Warren Commission*. But hold on, that's not even correct because there's precious little revealed here that could be described as secret. Allen Dulles turning up in his slippers and nodding off, for instance? Didn't we read about that in Epstein's *Inquest* back in 1966? Unless I'm suffering from some 'critical community' terminal myopia, such 'secrets' that are revealed are trite and of little or no consequence. You know, the sort of thing you'd find not rocking the boat in a *Reader's Digest* article. Perhaps a better and more accurate subtitle would be: *Some Warren Commission stuff*.

Shenon was approached at his desk on the *New York Times* by a 'prominent American lawyer' who was 'a young staff investigator on the Warren Commission' and urged 'to tell our story'. This is what Shenon has attempted to do; but he's a prisoner of his sources, walks the straight and narrow, and is remarkably incurious for a journalist (but then he did work for the *NY Times* and he is writing about the JFK assassination). Nowhere does he reveal the identity of this lawyer, which is curious: fifty years later the guy can't put his head above the parapet?

It is taken for granted by Shenon from page one that there are two immutable and incontestable facts about the

assassination: 1) Oswald shot JFK, 2) Oswald shot Tippit.¹ These are so manifest to Shenon that he scarcely bothers to discuss them. (Why bother when you've got stellar eyewitnesses like Howard Brennan and Helen Markham?!) You know, it would be like marshalling evidence to prove the sky is blue. What's the point? If there is any criticism of the Warren Commission it so low key and muted that the reader would hardly notice it; but even this criticism is soon deflected to the Commission's inquiry agents, the FBI and CIA, and centres on what exactly Oswald was doing in Mexico City. Shenon argues that if the investigations there had been done properly evidence would have been discovered that proved the Cubans to be behind the events of Dealey Plaza. Yes, the Cubans, stupid! And if no concrete evidence has been forthcoming it just goes to show how sneaky and devious those Cubans are at covering their tracks.

The book seems to have generally received good reviews – in the mainstream media, that is. So, no surprises there; but these are reviews that, based on internal evidence, seem to be authored by writers with only a rudimentary understanding of the assassination, indeed if that. Let's take, as an example, a review that appeared in London in *The Independent*, 15 November 2013, by a Will Dean whose previous credits are largely television reviews. Dean's opening paragraph:

'In the acknowledgements to this masterful piece of modern history a name stands out. That of Don DeLillo. In his thanks Shenon marvels at how close DeLillo's fiction came to the truth about the Kennedy murder and the Warren Commission which was set up to get to the truth of what happened on that day in Dallas.'

Don DeLillo's 1988 novel *Libra*, a fictionalised account of Oswald, has always been a firm favourite of the mainstream media and it's one of the very few books on the assassination

¹ There's actually a third one, too: Jack Ruby had no assistance from anyone in the Dallas PD in gaining access to the basement, and he shot Oswald on the spur of the moment (no hidden agenda). How do we know this? Simple: he left his dog unattended in his car, proof that he intended to return.

these reviewers seem ever to have read. They feel more comfortable with a novelist than mere researchers; besides DeLillo can supply insights and understanding that will always elude the non-fiction writer (!). The second para is more DeLillo and Dean quotes from *Libra* wherein the *Warren Report* is described as 'the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to Iowa City and lived to a hundred', a document '[so] lost to syntax and other arrangements, that it resembles a kind of mind-spatter'. If anyone can explain what this means I'd be mightily obliged; and, further, why is it cluttering up the review? What's this got to do with anything? But, I guess, we're in *The New Yorker*/Malcolm Gladwell territory where JFK's assassination is now merely a literary event or cultural artefact (going with this is the belief that we'll never get to the truth about it, so why bother?).

DeLillo's description of the *Warren Report* is so wide of the mark it really is nonsense. The *Report* is a cogent and well argued document, but one based on faulty findings, omissions, selectivity and the striving to substantiate a prior conclusion. And what is mind-spatter?

Shenon's book is an attempt to 'understand the mind-spatter of the report [sic]' continues Dean. Further, 'Days after the killing, as conspiracy theories were already beginning to swarm regarding plots by the Cuban and Soviet governments, President Lyndon Johnson wanted to nip them in the bud' and thus initiated the Warren Commission. But hold on a second, there were plenty of conspiracy theories involving others, like the CIA, the domestic far Right, Texas oil interests, and so on, though Dean chooses not to mention these.

Dean reveals that the Commission is a 'key part' of Kennedy history (!) and says that DeLillo describes it as the '*Oxford English Dictionary* of the assassination'. The *OED* is not a narrative so, perhaps, the Bible or the New Testament might be a better comparison. Or even *What Katy Did Next*. But why bother to quote this? (He's a novelist! We gotta listen.) Dean recounts Shenon showing that the commissioners did very little work themselves and how the day-to-day investigation was principally done by the young lawyers, 'several well-

meaning young men trying to find the truth in a morass of lies'. Oh, yeah? A couple, yes, but most of them were adhering to Warren Commission general counsel J Lee Rankin's instruction to Wesley Liebeler: 'We're supposed to be closing doors around here, not opening them.'

Dean continues: 'What Shenon reveals is not the vast conspiracy imagined by some, but just the sheer scale of confusion regarding the events in Dallas at the time and the many half-truths, back-covering and evasions which allowed the conspiracy to fester.' So, was the Warren Commission a conspiracy? It purported to get to the truth and go where the evidence led, but we now know that this was manifestly not the case, that the Commission decided from the get-go that Oswald was a lone mad nut who not only assassinated Kennedy but also murdered Patrolman Tippett. The Commission's job was to produce the prosecutor's brief.²

Echoing Shenon, Dean says one of the biggest failures of the federal agencies is the tracking of Oswald in Mexico City ('It is not the conspiracy imagined in Oliver Stone's execrable film *JFK*.' ³) This was the biggest failure? A first year student of the assassination could come up with a dozen other failures starting, perhaps, with Oswald's relationships with the FBI and the CIA. Dean continues, 'Even his [Shenon's] asides reek

² The highly detailed and unassailable study of the Warren Commission's failings and, most importantly, that its conclusions were already decided from the very beginning, is Gerald D. McKnight's *Breach of Trust: How the Warren Commission Failed the Nation and Why* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2005). Interestingly, McKnight's book is listed in Shenon's extensive bibliography but he either didn't read it or chose to ignore it in writing the book.

³ Execrable? I don't think even Stone's bitterest enemies would describe his films in terms of production (direction, editing, etc) as execrable. For a film that approaches the foothills of execrability try Peter Landesman's *Parkland* (2013). Its tagline is 'November 22, 1963, 12:38 pm - A trauma patient is rushed to Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas. His name is President John F. Kennedy.' However, the end credits contain this: 'All characters in this film are fictional and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.' This piece of junk has been sliced-and-diced by James DiEugenio in *Reclaiming Parkland: Tom Hanks, Vincent Bugliosi, and the JFK Assassination in the New Hollywood* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2013).

of deep reporting. We learn, for instance, that a CIA staffer in Mexico City served in the OSS (the CIA's precursor) with an agent Julia McWilliams, best known to millions as the celebrated chef Julia Child'. Deep reporting? Big deal!

Dean's concluding paragraph: 'There is enough uncovered here to give the JFK "truthers" another 50 years of speculation, but that is thanks to the details and errors revealed by the author. It is a sober, gripping study of one of history's most overstudied [*sic*] moments, a work fit to rank alongside the previous masterpiece of the murder, William Manchester's *Death of A President*'.

So, the critics are now to be known as 'truthers'! What next? Are we to be known as 'deniers' (you know, Warren deniers, Oswald deniers, etc)? And another curious word, 'overstudied'. This means to study too much or too hard, to study to excess. So, the Kennedy assassination has been overstudied. Perhaps Dean could inform us of the academic criteria he uses to ascertain when an historical event has been overstudied, and to give us further examples. When exactly did the case become overstudied? What year?

The plain fact is that there is nothing uncovered here to give the 'truthers another fifty years of speculation' or fifty minutes for that matter. The show has moved on and for Dean to make this statement exposes his ignorance of the critical literature. In fact his ignorance extends to the Warren Commission itself. He writes of the 'final 26-volume report.' *Wrong*. The *Report* is one volume. Subsequently published were 26 volumes of *Hearings* (and exhibits).