

“Louisiana Mystery— An Essay Review”

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When a great, dominating figure dies, a legend often emerges after the event. Men once believed that King Arthur would rise from his grave some day and reunite the scattered fragments of the Celtic race. Frederick Barbarossa was not dead, the Germans used to say, but only sleeping in a rocky cavern, and when the ravens ceased to fly about the summit of the mountain, he would rise and restore Germany's ancient glories.

Americans have not yet found it necessary to create a legend that some dead leader will come again to save them. Indeed, the only approach to the rise-from-the-grave theme has carried an opposite connotation. Back in the late 1940's people all over the Middle West would tell you that Franklin Roosevelt was not really dead: They're hiding him until they can get him cured and then they'll bring him out again, and, boy, you know what that means. Nor have Americans gone nearly as far as have the people of some other countries in manufacturing mysteries about the deaths of famous personages. For a long time the only enduring mystery was related to the death of Lincoln, and it did not involve the central character in the scene but his assassin. John Wilkes Booth was not killed in that barn, this legend whispered. The body of some other man was identified as Booth, and the killer lived in disguise somewhere. He was, in fact, reliably reported to have been seen in a half dozen or more towns. In recent years we have seen the budding of a mystery about Lincoln himself. Some students have advanced evidence that Secretary of War Stanton or

some other high official had something to do with engineering the shooting of the President. The evidence is too partial as yet to prove anything—but is sufficient to lay the basis for a legend.

Except for this developing Lincoln legend, only one other death in American history has stirred much controversy, has evoked any mystery, has called forth a tradition. It is, of course, the death of Huey Long. All Louisianians know the main outline of the story. On the night of September 8, 1935, Long was shot in the capitol at Baton Rouge. Thirty hours later, early on the morning of the tenth, he died at Our Lady of the Lake Sanitarium. Most Louisianians believed then, as probably most of them do now, that Long was shot by young Dr. Carl Austin Weiss, who was then shot down and riddled by Long's bodyguards. Weiss was moved to commit his deed by one of the following motives, or some combination of them: (1) he was the designated agent of a political group that had decided to remove Long; (2) he acted on his own to remove a man he considered to be a tyrant; (3) he was resentful that Long was preparing to put through the legislature a bill that would gerrymander his father-in-law out of a judgeship; (4) he had heard that Long had said, or was about to say, that his wife's family had colored blood.

This was what might be called the "official" version, attested to by a number of witnesses who were present at the event. But almost immediately doubt was cast on it. Members of the Weiss family said that the doctor gave no indication whatever on the day before the shooting or on the day of it that he intended to commit a violent act; rather, he conducted himself like a man who expected to continue living a normal, happy life. Over the years there grew up an "unofficial" or "Weiss" version of what happened on that tragic night. In summary form, it went as follows. Weiss entered the capitol unarmed for the purpose of confronting Long. An altercation ensued, and Weiss struck Long. The bodyguards then gunned Weiss down, and in the confusion of the moment a wild shot hit Long. Later one of the Long people went to Weiss's car, parked nearby, and took from it a pistol the doctor was ac-

customed to carrying and placed it near his body. Or, another version, Weiss was armed and in the altercation fired a shot from his small-caliber weapon which either missed its target or, even though hitting it, was not the fatal shot. The reasoning here is that no small bullet was found in the walls of the building, although there was a wound of exit on Long's back. Therefore Weiss's bullet must have remained within Long's body and the wound of exit was caused by another bullet, a wild shot from one of the guards, which was the fatal missile.

Still a third version, which had some adherents at one time but which no longer has much support, held that one of the guards deliberately shot Long. According to this wild supposition, Long's refusal to make a deal with President Roosevelt had placed some of his top lieutenants in danger of federal prosecution. One, or several, of them, had instructed a guard to shoot Long if a favorable opportunity offered. Weiss happened along, an argument started, and a guard, who must have been a combination of John Dillinger and J. Edgar Hoover, gunned the boss down and pinned the blame on Weiss.

So the stories ran over the years, and the legend grew and the mystery deepened. Some observers ventured that one day the proper people might be persuaded to speak and to reveal the truth. Others doubted that the full record would ever be made known. Now, fortunately and at last, we have two books* which attempt to reconstruct the assassination, or the accidental killing, to recreate the scenes of September 8 to 10 and the mood and the events of the immediately preceding days. Both are by newspaper men. Hermann Deutsch is a veteran New Orleans journalist and columnist, one of Louisiana's great political reporters, a man who knew Long well almost from the beginning of the latter's rise to power. David Zinman, much younger, is the Associated Press correspondent in New Orleans. Both authors offer a terse summary of Long's career and an evaluation of his significance. Mr. Zinman's account

**The Huey Long Murder Case*. By Hermann B. Deutsch. (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1963. x, 180 pp. \$3.95)

The Day Huey Long Was Shot. By David Zinman. (New York: Ivan Obolensky, Inc., 1963. xiii, 289 pp. \$4.50)

is based on secondary works and is not completely accurate. Mr. Deutsch's is drawn from his phenomenal memory and is essentially accurate. It suffers, however, from an oversimplification of some pretty complicated matters.

But both authors employed approved methods of research in seeking material for their main theme, the death itself. They have utilized what documentary sources are available, newspapers, books, hospital records, and others. Wisely, both elected to rely heavily on personal interviews with people connected with the event. Undoubtedly, in so doing they have saved for history some valuable materials that otherwise would have disappeared forever. The lengthy quoting of some of these interviews invests the two books with something of the quality of a source account. The quotes sometimes distract from the dramatic flow of the narrative, but students of the Long story will be grateful to the authors for including them. The same students will also want to record their appreciation to Deutsch and Zinman for making the first systematic examinations of the death of Long.

Interestingly enough, the books represent each of the clashing versions of what happened. Deutsch presents the official or accepted view. He believes that Weiss went to the capitol armed, with the purpose of killing Long, and that a shot from the doctor's gun killed Long. As to motive, Deutsch thinks that the alleged racial slur prompted Weiss. If this was the case, Weiss was the victim of a tragic mistake, Deutsch emphasizes. Long was about to make his big pitch nationally and would never have dared to introduce a racial question that would have alienated Northern audiences. While amassing a good deal of evidence to buttress his own case, Deutsch poses some hard questions for proponents of the other case to answer. Long fled the scene immediately and before the fusillade of bullets from the bodyguards began. How then could he have been struck by a stray bullet? Weiss's body was not identified until sometime later. How then could anyone from Long's entourage have known what car to go to among the many parked in front of the building to get the doctor's pistol?

Zinman is the first author who has had anything like full

access to members of the Weiss family and to the family of Weiss's wife, the Pavys. Basing his case largely on their recollections, he makes the following argument. Weiss had no motive. The Pavys were not disturbed by the gerrymander, and it is unlikely that Weiss was moved enough by it to commit a violent act. It is doubtful that Weiss had heard about the racial slur; even if he had, he was not the kind of person who would have resolved to kill on the basis of a rumor. All of his actions indicate that he had no thought of murder in his mind. Like Deutsch, Zinman asks some questions of the opposition. This, it seems to me, is his most telling one. Weiss lived only two blocks from the capitol, an easy walk. If he had decided to kill Long, would he not have simply walked to the building? By driving he took a chance on not finding a parking place. Therefore did not Weiss that night start to the hospital, where he had told his wife he was going, and go into the capitol on impulse, probably to have something out with Long? Zinman thinks Weiss did enter on impulse, that some kind of confrontation took place, and that a stray bullet from one of the bodyguards did kill Long. Zinman argues his case well. But it seems to me that it rests too much on supposition, that Weiss was acting at every moment coolly, rationally, logically.

As a biographer of Long, I can appreciate the magnitude of the service performed by these two authors. Each has made an immense contribution to the Long story. But I doubt that either has found the final answer. That answer probably will never be found. There will always be some mystery about this dramatic episode in Louisiana history. I have some evidence not available to either Deutsch or Zinman. But even with this added to theirs, I would hesitate to put forward a dogmatic claim. On the basis of present knowledge, I would cast a vote for the Deutsch thesis—but with the qualification that it might have happened another way.