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JFK Conspiracy Theories at 50

How the Skeptics Got It Wrong and Why It Matters

BY DAVID REITZES

IT HAS BEEN CALLED THE MOTHER OF ALL CONSPIRACY theories: the belief that the vibrant, widely admired 35th President of the United States, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, was brutally cut down not by a lone gunman with inscrutable motives, but by a shadowy cabal of—take your pick—mobsters, Communists, radical right-wingers, traitorous CIA operatives, or mutinous members of the military-industrial complex. The JFK assassination has been cited by countless commentators as the moment the U.S. lost its innocence, an event that seemed to open a veritable Pandora's Box of evils that have been raging riot ever since. When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis in April 1968, Senator Robert F. Kennedy observed, "You know that fellow Harvey Lee Oswald, whatever his name is, set something loose in this country."¹ Two months later, RFK himself was dead from an assassin's bullets. The presidency of JFK's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, engendered the "credibility gap," as polls showed more and more Americans no longer trusted their government. The tragic and divisive Vietnam War was still unfolding when the Watergate scandal emerged, followed by years of malaise. For many, at least in retrospect, the JFK assassination marked the beginning of the end.

To dispel the shock and confusion that ensued after accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald was gunned down during an abortive police transfer by stripclub operator Jack Ruby, President Johnson convened a blue-ribbon panel composed of distinguished leaders from both the public and private sectors and consisting of both Democrats and Republicans. The Warren Commission, as it came to be known after its chairman—Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren—has become one of the most vilified investigative panels in U.S. history, its name virtually synonymous with conspiracy or cover-up. Since the commission announced its conclusions in late 1964—principally that Lee Harvey Oswald alone killed Kennedy and there was no evidence of a con-

spiracy—skepticism of its findings has become as persistent as taxes and, in the words of one writer, "an American obsession as deep as baseball."²

Careful and sober analysis of the evidence affirms the commission's conclusions and vanquishes the arguments of the skeptics. So, 50 years on, what does it even mean to be a skeptic in this hotly contested debate? Surely it cannot be as simple as declaring, "I don't trust the government, therefore I am a skeptic"; such an equation would abdicate independent thought in favor of pure cynicism. As Michael Shermer seeks to remind us, "skepticism is not a position; skepticism is an approach to claims, in the same way that science is not a subject but a method."³ Skepticism of any government's aims and efficacy is surely healthy—if not crucial—for a democracy; but the point is to use critical thinking to properly assess the evidence, not to merely doubt for the sake of doubting.

And conspiracies do happen, sometimes even at the highest levels of our government; Watergate and the Iran-Contra scandal were conspiracies that reached into the highest office in the land. People in positions of influence conspire to commit unethical and illegal acts every day; it is more commonly called corruption. Obviously, it is imperative that we remain alert to the possibility of very real conspiracies in our midst (eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, after all), but it is equally important that we use our critical faculties to distinguish verifiable evidence from idle speculation.

The Grassy Knoll Witnesses

The Warren Commission affirmed the earlier conclusions reached by the Dallas Police Department and the FBI: Texas School Book Depository employee Lee Harvey Oswald fired the shots that killed John F. Kennedy from the building's south-eastern most sixth-floor window. Conspiracy theories positing Oswald as a lone gunman in league with other plotters have never gained much of a foothold in the popular

imagination; the critical point has always been whether there was a second gunman.

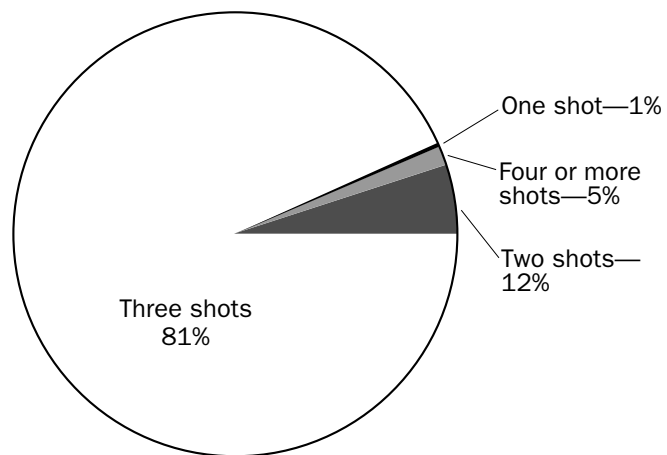
Journalist Jefferson Morley has called the case “a kind of national Rorschach test of the American political psyche,” writing, “The choices we make—to accept the credibility of the Warren Commission...or to believe eyewitnesses who heard gunshots coming from the grassy knoll, and so decide more people were involved—are shaped, consciously and unconsciously, by our premises about the U.S. government and the way power is exercised in America.”⁴ Philadelphia attorney Vincent Salandria was one of numerous skeptics who combed through the 26 volumes of evidence published by the Warren Commission and took heed of such witnesses. “My initial feeling,” he later explained, “was that if this were a simple assassination, as the Commission claimed, the facts would come together very neatly. If there were more than one assassin the details would not fit.”⁵

But is reality so neat and tidy? The confusion, shock, and pandemonium at the scene of the crime can hardly be overstated. Amidst the sensory assault of roaring motorcycles, wailing sirens, and the highly animated throng cheering the arrival of President John F. Kennedy and his elegant wife, Jacqueline, one of the most momentous events of the 20th century occurred in mere seconds. Eyewitness perceptions varied wildly. Some thought shots had come from behind the limousine (the vicinity of the Book Depository), while others thought they came from in front or from the right side (the grassy knoll);⁶ three witnesses thought the shots sounded as if they came from right inside the President’s car.⁷ One witness erroneously thought a bystander was shot in the foot and fell down.⁸ One of the closest witnesses “thought [she] saw some men in plain clothes shooting back,” which certainly didn’t happen, “but everything was such a blur.”⁹ Early press bulletins reported that a Secret Service agent had been killed at the scene.¹⁰

Dallas Morning News reporter Hugh Aynesworth, himself an eyewitness, would later recall the difficulty of sorting out what people at the scene were telling him: “I remember interviewing people that said they saw certain things; some did, some didn’t. Even then there were people making up things. Even then! I remember interviewing a young couple where the guy was telling me that he had seen this and he had seen that, and his wife said, ‘You didn’t see that! We were back in the parking lot when it happened!’ Even then!”¹¹

Skeptics were quick to emphasize the reports of eyewitnesses who seemed to contradict the official conclusion. Several witnesses said they had heard at

How many shots did witnesses hear at Dealey Plaza?
Exceptions to the rule receive an inordinate amount of attention from conspiracy theorists.



least four shots fired, while the Warren Commission concluded there had only been three shots, all fired by Oswald. There was a clear consensus, however: 81 percent of the witnesses who expressed an opinion believed there had been precisely three shots. (The next most common opinion—at 12 percent—was two shots.)¹² Few believed they had heard more than three shots, but these exceptions would receive an inordinate amount of attention from the doubters.

As to the direction the shots came from, the witnesses were undeniably divided.¹³ To explain this, it is important to understand not only the fragile nature of eyewitness testimony—particularly during moments of highly elevated stress¹⁴—but also problems with eyewitness descriptions of gunfire in particular, as well as difficulties raised by specific conditions at the scene of the crime. The authoritative textbook, *Firearms Investigation Identification and Evidence*, states, “It is extremely difficult to tell the direction [from which a shot was fired] by the sound of discharge of a firearm.” The authors go on to note that “little credence” should be placed in such testimony.¹⁵ Not only that, but as Charles Manson-prosecutor and later JFK-assassination author Vincent Bugliosi puts it, “Dealey Plaza resounds with echoes, the multistory buildings on the north, south, and east sides making it a virtual echo chamber.”¹⁶ Some eyewitnesses referred to the echoes in their testimony, and “strong reverberations and echoes” were later noted by a bioacoustics expert conducting experiments in Dealey Plaza for the House Select Committee reinvestigating the crime in 1978.¹⁷

There is one fact that is hard to dispute, however:



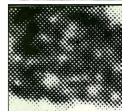
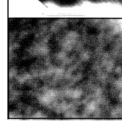
Above: Mary Ann Moorman's blurry Polaroid photograph of the grassy knoll inspired many attempts to discover hidden figures.

Below: A few of the potential assassination conspirators "discovered" in the Moorman photo.

(Right) Robert Groden isolated the same area as David Lifton's first discovery in his book *JFK: The Case for Conspiracy* (1976), co-authored with Peter Model. Groden included a drawing outlining the "puff of smoke" and his interpretation of an alleged assassin.



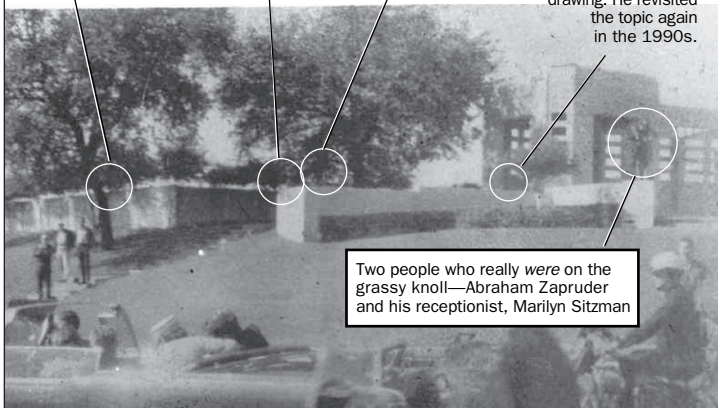
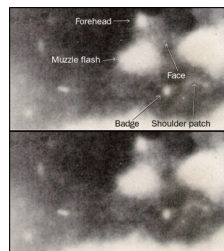
(Below) Gary Mack's "Badge Man" promoted by a 1988 British documentary series *The Men Who Killed Kennedy*, was later debunked by Dale Myers.



(Above) Ray Marcus wrote about Lifton's Number 5 Man in 1967, and provided an interpretive drawing. He revisited the topic again in the 1990s.



(Above) Location of the knoll shooter by Josiah Thompson from his book *Six Seconds in Dallas* (1976).



Two people who really were on the grassy knoll—Abraham Zapruder and his receptionist, Marilyn Sitzman

of the dozens of witnesses who described the sound of the shots, very few (you could count them on one hand) said that they came from more than one direction.¹⁸ The rare exceptions, however, would soon be elevated to "star witness" status in pro-conspiracy books and documentaries; they are the ones the critics used to "prove" a conspiracy.

The Parkland Hospital Professionals

There are other eyewitnesses in this case, however, that the critics seized upon as being even more damaging to the official story: the doctors and nurses who struggled in vain to save the President's life in Trauma Room One of Parkland Hospital in Dallas. In statements to the press that weekend and in their Warren Commission testimony, many of these medical professionals made observations indicative—some strongly so—of shots from the President's front rather than the rear. For example, some described a massive blowout to the rear of the head, rather than the right front—forward of the ear—where the autopsy report placed it. The wound in the President's throat was also referred to by some as an entrance wound, not the exit wound the autopsy pathologists determined it to be. Surely, the reasoning goes, these highly trained and experienced professionals could not *all* be wrong.

But they were wrong, and research shows this is not at all unusual. A study published in 1993 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* examined 46 cases involving fatal gunshot wounds over a five-year period. By comparing the post-mortem findings of a board-certified forensic pathologist to the previous assessments made by trauma specialists, the study found that the trauma specialists made errors about the nature of bullet wounds (such as the number of bullets involved and in distinguishing between entrance and exit wounds) in 52 percent of the cases. The study concluded "the odds that a trauma specialist will correctly interpret certain fatal gunshot wounds are no better than the flip of a coin."¹⁹

In truth, as with the Dealey Plaza witnesses, the testimony of the Parkland doctors and nurses is highly contradictory and confused.²⁰ They were trying to save the President's life, not examine his wounds to determine the direction of the shots.²¹

Blow-Ups

If the eyewitness testimony was less than conclusive, perhaps the technology of photography offered an alternative. A Polaroid photograph taken by bystander Mary Ann Moorman captured the grassy knoll at almost precisely the instant of the fatal shot to the President. Researcher David Lifton found a

reproduction of the photograph in a book in 1965 and quickly spotted what appeared to be a puff of smoke in the background, “and, just behind it, a human form—someone apparently crouched behind the wall. Were my eyes deceiving me?”²²

Lifton obtained a copy of the negative used by the book’s publisher and eagerly set about getting the film developed, even talking his way into the darkroom. “It was exciting and frightening,” he wrote. “Watching the images come up to full contrast, I felt I was joining the ranks of the eyewitnesses—a year and a half after the event. And perhaps my view was better.”²³ These images weren’t “figments of my imagination,” he said, “but realities recorded by Mrs. Moorman’s camera.”

Utilizing a higher quality source, Lifton would later conclude that this perceived gunman was, in fact, a photographic artifact, not a real person.²⁴ In the meantime he had found another gunman in the photograph. And then another. And another. And yet another.²⁵ His findings were disputed by researcher Josiah Thompson, who had found his own gunman (or, well, *something*) in a different spot in the same photograph.²⁶

A 1988 British documentary series, *The Men Who Killed Kennedy*, placed great importance on another image discovered in the Moorman photo by researcher Gary Mack, of what was alleged to be a man in a police officer’s uniform firing a gun from behind the stockade fence, dubbed “Badge Man.” Independent studies by photographic expert Geoffrey Crawley and assassination researcher Dale Myers determined that if Badge Man were a human being of average height and build, he would have been standing well behind the fence and elevated several feet above ground level (32 feet behind the fence and 4.5 feet above the ground, according to Myers’ study), which he described as “an unreasonable and untenable firing position.”²⁷

David Lifton eventually decided that there was a subjective component to all of these perceptions. “It became evident that those who were already in disagreement with the Warren Commission conclusions found it far easier to ‘see’ people on the knoll than those who believed in the Report,” he observed. “Eventually, I concluded that photographic enlargements had very limited use as evidence.”²⁸

Tramps Like Us

Some of the crime scene photographs had more to offer than blurs and shadows. There were the “three tramps” whose pictures were snapped by newsmen shortly after police officers pulled them from a rail-

road boxcar behind the grassy knoll. The Warren Commission had never mentioned these characters; surely they could have been up to no good. Once Watergate made national headlines, it was even pointed out that if you looked really hard, two of the three resembled Watergate conspirators Frank Sturgis and E. Howard Hunt—although comparisons of morphological and metric features between the tramps and Sturgis and Hunt would ultimately rule them out as candidates.²⁹

The story was revived in 1980, when contract killer Charles Harrelson (father of actor Woody), was in the midst of a six-hour standoff with Texas police. High on cocaine and threatening suicide, Harrelson claimed involvement in the Kennedy assassination. Researchers were quick to point out that Harrelson bore a resemblance to the tallest (“Sturgis”) tramp.³⁰ Harrelson later recanted the tale,³¹ calling the alleged confession simply “an effort to elongate my life.”³² Later, a book was published alleging that the third tramp was Charles Frederick Rogers of Houston, who had disappeared following the gruesome 1965 mutilation murder of his parents. Before long, one Chauncey Marvin Holt came forward, claiming to have been the short (“Hunt”) tramp and a participant in a CIA assassination plot, along with Harrelson and Rogers.³³

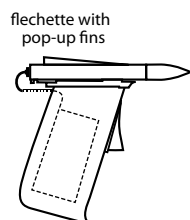
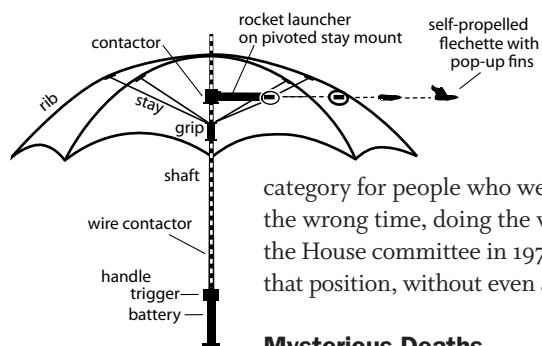
The true names of the three men finally surfaced in Dallas police files released to the public in 1989, and journalists were able to confirm their identities, tracking down two who were still alive and a family member of the third, who was deceased. The three tramps were John Forrester Gedney, Gus W. Abrams, and Harold Doyle; they were, in the end, tramps after all.³⁴

Umbrella Man

Then there was the case of the “Umbrella Man,” a mysterious figure glimpsed in several photos, standing at the side of the road with an open umbrella over his head on a perfectly sunny day. Was he a conspirator signaling to gunmen in the surrounding areas, perhaps? Or could the umbrella itself have been a sophisticated weapon, as one researcher postulated at length?³⁵ After years of anonymity and considerable speculation, the Umbrella Man was outed by a friend to the Dallas press; his name was Louie Steven Witt. Dimly aware that the image of former British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s trademark umbrella was associated with then-Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy’s support for Chamberlain’s policy of Nazi appeasement in the late 1930s, Witt had come to Dealey Plaza to heckle the President—albeit at the worst possible moment. “I think if the Guinness Book of World Records had a



The three tramps glumly contemplate their fate after being arrested after the assassination in the rail-yards next to Dealey Plaza. They were later identified by Dallas Police (from top to bottom) as Harold Doyle, Gus Abrams, and John F. Gedney.



A redrawing of Robert Cutler's diagrams of a hypothetical umbrella weapon (<http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/piece1.gif>).



Louie Steven Witt came forward in 1978 to admit he was the Umbrella Man, and to testify before the HSCA (the House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations) that the umbrella had been a form of political protest symbolism.

category for people who were at the wrong place at the wrong time, doing the wrong thing," Witt told the House committee in 1978, "I would be No. 1 in that position, without even a close runner-up."³⁶

Mysterious Deaths

One of the most durable myths surrounding the JFK assassination concerns the "mysterious deaths" of assassination witnesses, a story publicized nationally in 1967 by *Ramparts* magazine. The idea had originated with Penn Jones, the cantankerous writer/editor/publisher of a six-page, weekly newspaper in rural Midlothian, Texas, who was compiling a list of witnesses who had passed away under allegedly suspicious circumstances. The story appealed to *Ramparts* editor Warren Hinckle, who had been put off by what he perceived as the overly academic style of the material the Warren Commission's critics were submitting to him. "I wanted something that would get people talking about the Warren Report with the cynicism they did about the weather report," Hinckle later recalled. "In my book, the only reliable indicator of what is weighing on the national consciousness is what people are talking about in neighborhood bars. The books that had come out criticizing the Warren Report had stirred the nation's intellectuals but left the masses becalmed. I wanted to churn the bars."³⁷

Neither Jones nor Hinckle saw a problem in the fact that of the dozen-plus witnesses on the "mysterious deaths" list, only one of them could, in fact, be considered a witness to the assassination. Others included Oswald's landlady, two newsmen who wrote about the case, one of Jack Ruby's lawyers, the cab driver who gave Oswald a ride following the assassination, one of Jack Ruby's strippers, the husband of another stripper, the brother of an eyewitness to Oswald's slaying of Dallas police officer J. D. Tippit approximately 45 minutes after the assassination, and TV game show fixture Dorothy Kilgallen. Even the *Ramparts* staff felt the need to qualify their inclusion of Kilgallen's name on the list, stating, "We know of no serious person who really believes that the death of Dorothy Kilgallen, the gossip columnist, was related to the Kennedy assassination. Still, she was passionately interested in the case, told friends she firmly believed there was a conspiracy and that she would find out the truth if it took her all her life."³⁸

Few of these deaths were even all that mysterious, contrary to the way they are presented in the *Ramparts* article.³⁹ But factual accuracy was never really the point. Sitting in a Brooklyn bar one day, Hinckle was gratified to hear "a toothless old lady tell the fellow next to her about 'all these people who

got murdered down in Texas because they knew who killed Kennedy'—I knew then that the national consciousness barrier had been cracked."⁴⁰

"Back and to the Left": The Zapruder Film

If there is a single piece of evidence that Warren Commission skeptics have held up as irrefutable proof of a conspiracy, it is what has come to be known as the "head snap": the moment in the motion picture film captured by bystander Abraham Zapruder when the President is shot in the head and it snaps strongly to his left. This shocking and iconic image provides the climactic moment in Oliver Stone's controversial conspiracy movie, *JFK*, shown repeatedly as actor Kevin Costner narrates: "This is the key shot. Watch it again. The President going back to his left. Shot from the front and right. Totally inconsistent with the shot from the Depository. Again—back and to the left... back and to the left... back and to the left."⁴¹

But does this really prove a shot from the front? Medical experts convened by the Rockefeller Commission in 1975⁴² evaluated the "head snap" and were "unanimous in finding that the violent backward and leftward motion of the President's upper body following the head shot was not caused by the impact of a bullet coming from the front or right front."⁴³

Drs. [Werner] Spitz, [Richard] Lindenberg and [Fred] Hodges reported that such a motion would be caused by a violent straightening and stiffening of the entire body as a result of a seizure-like neuromuscular reaction to major damage inflicted to nerve centers in the brain.

Dr. [Alfred] Olivier reported that the violent motions of the President's body following the head shot could not possibly have been caused by the impact of the bullet. He attributed the popular misconception on this subject to the dramatic effects employed in television and motion picture productions. The impact of such a bullet, he explained, can cause some immediate movement of the head in the direction of the bullet, but it would not produce any significant movement of the body.⁴⁴

An immediate movement of the head in the direction of the bullet, in fact, is what can be seen at the instant of impact, between Zapruder frames 312 and 313, as the President's head moves forward (2.3 inches forward, according to one study), prior to the more obvious lurch to the left beginning in frame 314.⁴⁵

Other experts agree, including the members of the 1978 House committee's forensic pathology panel (see below),⁴⁶ as well as Vincent Di Maio, a longtime forensic pathologist and author of the widely used

textbook, *Gunshot Wounds: Practical Aspects of Firearms, Ballistics, and Forensic Techniques*. In response to a suggestion that a “transfer of momentum” from a bullet could be responsible for the head snap, Di Maio, without hesitation, said, “No. That’s make-believe. That’s [something out of] Arnold Schwarzenegger pictures.”⁴⁷

Even forensic expert Cyril Wecht, long one of the most vociferous critics of the Warren Commission, when asked whether it is a “matter of physics” that a body will move in the same direction as a bullet that strikes it, testified (in the murder trial of Lyle and Erik Menendez) that “some of the [Newtonian] concepts, indeed are applicable and relevant, but you have to then factor in the biological element, the entire neuromuscular system and so on, all of the voluntary and involuntary reflexive aspects of it.” “Sir [Isaac] Newton and others just never dealt with those things. . . . That’s just a very different situation.”⁴⁸

Shots in the Dark

In the face of ballooning doubts about the Warren Commission’s conclusions, the House Select Committee on Assassinations was established to reinvestigate JFK’s killing and pass judgment on the commission’s findings. By the time the committee wrapped up its investigation, it had used state of the art forensic techniques to resolve numerous questions about the assassination and the evidence, and validate the Warren Commission’s core conclusions. However, in a move strongly contested by several committee members, the HSCA also endorsed the findings of a computer science professor and his assistant, indicating that a shot had indeed been fired from the grassy knoll.

The evidence was an audio recording of police radio transmissions made at the approximate time of the assassination from an unknown police motorcycle with its microphone stuck in the “on” position. While the recording contained no audible sounds of gunfire, the HSCA endorsed the theory that the motorcycle in question was part of the presidential motorcade; and that waveforms of sounds on the tape, as plotted by a computer on a lengthy strip of graph paper, were identical to waveforms of actual test shots fired in Dealey Plaza, three from the Texas School Book Depository and one from the grassy knoll. There was a high probability, the committee concluded, that a conspiracy had killed John F. Kennedy.⁴⁹

When the findings were subjected to peer review by a National Academy of Sciences committee, however, the failings of the HSCA’s conspiracy theory were revealed. The Committee on Ballistic Acoustics, better

known as the Ramsey Panel—after its chairman, Nobel Prize-winning physicist Norman F. Ramsey—found that not only was there no evidence of gun shots on the Dallas recording, but the waveforms identified as shots were actually recorded approximately one minute *after* the assassination, as voices in the recording indicated that the limousine had already been instructed to head for Parkland Hospital.⁵⁰ The House committee’s conspiracy evidence was a bust.

Cui Bono?

Even as the HSCA was confirming the case against Oswald as the lone assassin, doubters were shifting into overdrive, pointing fingers at an ever-increasing cast of conspiracy suspects. While conspiracy theorists insist that their accusations are drawn from evidence, the motley assortment of suspects they have come up with suggests that bias plays a more prominent role.

The Radical Right

When news of the assassination was broadcast, many initially assumed that the blame lay with members of Dallas’ highly vocal, radical right wing, who despised Kennedy for his support of the civil rights movement and for his perceived weakness in the face of Communism. In fact, a number of associates had warned the President not to travel to Dallas, where U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson had been spat at and struck with a demonstrator’s picket sign just a month earlier at a United Nations Day event. “Welcome Mr. Kennedy to Dallas,” read the facetious headline of a full-page ad in the *Dallas Morning News* of November 22, over a series of questions accusing the President of selling the country out to Communists. On the morning of the assassination, thousands of handbills were distributed on Dallas streets with photos of front and side views of the President’s face arranged like a mug shot; the headline read, “WANTED FOR TREASON.”⁵¹

Suspicious of a right wing plot took a seemingly lethal blow when the suspect—Oswald—turned out to be a self-professed Marxist and ardent supporter of Fidel Castro. Even the President’s grieving widow Jacqueline was taken aback. “He didn’t even have the satisfaction of being killed for civil rights,” she said. “It had to be some silly little Communist.”⁵² It seemed to rob his death of any meaning.⁵³

In fact, the Soviets could have been none too pleased to learn that the accused assassin was the unstable young man they had reluctantly allowed to defect to Russia in 1959 after he attempted suicide in Moscow. (Thoroughly disillusioned with the state of

Marxism in the U.S.S.R., he had returned to the United States two years later.) Within hours of JFK's death, Soviet propaganda organs were declaring the assassination to be the work of a radical right wing cabal.⁵⁴ The theme was picked up by left-leaning journalists in Europe and the U.S.⁵⁵ Over a decade later the KGB would fabricate and disseminate evidence intended to link Oswald to Soviet intelligence's arch enemy, the CIA.⁵⁶

To those who were predisposed to certain suspicions, however, little evidence, authentic or otherwise, was really necessary. Describing her "instantaneous skepticism about the official version of what happened in Dallas,"⁵⁷ conspiracy author Sylvia Meagher recalled the moment she heard JFK's death announced on the radio. "Someone in the room screamed with shock and grief," Meagher wrote. "Someone cursed the John Birch Society and its kind. 'Don't worry,' I said derisively, 'you'll see, it was a Communist who did it.'"⁵⁸

The Red Menace

Indeed, Oswald's leftist background was quickly seized upon by red baiters everywhere. Dallas assistant district attorney Bill Alexander, incensed by the immediate nationwide condemnations of notoriously conservative Dallas, even spoke of charging Oswald with participation in a Communist conspiracy.⁵⁹ "I wanted to expose Oswald for what he was, a Communist," Alexander said later. "I thought someone should emphasize it. I knew that [the conspiracy charge] wouldn't hold up, but it needed to be said."⁶⁰

Theories of Oswald as a Communist agent, in fact, would not fare well. While he was an avowed leftist, the simple fact is that other leftists he came into contact with wanted nothing to do with him. His bogus chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee in New Orleans was a one-man operation, complete with documents he created himself.⁶¹ He sent a (later world-famous) photograph of himself dressed in black and brandishing a rifle to the editors of *The Militant*, a Trotskyist newspaper (to show them he was "ready for anything"); the recipients quickly threw it out, fearing Oswald to be either a nut or a provocateur.⁶² When he caused a scene at the Cuban consulate in Mexico City in October 1963, insisting upon a travel visa to Cuba so he could join Castro's revolution, a consulate staffer refused and told him point blank that someone like him could bring the revolution nothing but harm.⁶³

CIA: The Enemy Within?

Conspiracy theories involving secret societies have been with us for centuries, frequently oriented along

religious lines. Religious themes are largely passé among modern conspiracists, but there is one secret society of sorts that may inspire suspicion among Americans from every walk of life and of all political persuasions.

The moment Jack Ruby stepped from the shadows to gun down Oswald, prominent researcher Vincent Salandria says he knew that the CIA had killed Kennedy: "The use of a Mafia-related killer [sic] to dispatch the patsy while in custody, and that patsy's patently false left-wing and liberal guises, convinced me that the assassination was the work of U.S. intelligence."⁶⁴ "The nature of the conspiracy that took President Kennedy's life was from the outset quite obvious to anyone who knew how to look and was willing to do so," declares researcher Martin Schotz. "I and other ordinary citizens know, *know for a fact*, that there was a conspiracy and that it was organized at the highest levels of the CIA."⁶⁵ "Is there any doubt that Lee Harvey Oswald, quickly and deliberately portrayed by the Government as a simple, superficial personality—a lone nut—was clearly a well-trained and groomed tool of the intelligence establishment?" former HSCA investigator Gaeton Fonzi asked a gathering of assassination researchers.⁶⁶ "This, I suggest, should be our challenging cry for the future: *We know who killed President Kennedy. Why don't you?*"⁶⁷

Granted, as secret societies go, the Central Intelligence Agency has two clear strikes against it: first, in contrast to some organizations that have been singled out for suspicion over the years, the CIA undoubtedly exists; and, second, it was not so long after the Warren Commission closed up shop that public revelations of CIA involvement in plans to assassinate foreign leaders began raising questions about precisely who authorized such plots and whether such ruthless methods could conceivably be employed against, say, a highly placed domestic target.

After this, however, evidence of the Agency's culpability in the President's slaying begins to get scarce. CIA accusers point to a commonly cited (but anonymously sourced) claim that President Kennedy had threatened to "splinter the CIA into a thousand pieces and scatter it to winds" after the Bay of Pigs debacle, as well as claims that Agency personnel were bitter about his conduct during the aborted invasion.⁶⁸ But historians agree that, once fences were mended, Kennedy enjoyed an unusually close relationship with the Agency—a relationship that, according to one CIA-commissioned report, "would only rarely be matched in future administrations."⁶⁹ Only weeks before his death, JFK had this to say about allegations of CIA misconduct in Vietnam: "I think

that while the CIA may have made mistakes, as we all do, on different occasions, and has had many successes which may go unheralded, in my opinion in this case it is unfair to charge them as they have been charged. I think they have done a good job.”⁷⁰

Conspiracy theorists also may find it self-evidently suspicious that President Johnson appointed to the Warren Commission former CIA director Allen Dulles, who had resigned in the wake of the Bay of Pigs. Whose idea was this? It turns out that LBJ actually recruited Dulles for the commission at the request of Attorney General Robert Kennedy.⁷¹ Contrary to the speculation that runs rampant in pro-conspiracy literature, JFK and Dulles greatly admired one another, and the Kennedy brothers had considerable praise for Dulles well after the Bay of Pigs invasion.⁷²

Suspicious about the CIA often begin with questions about whether Oswald’s highly unusual defection to the Soviet Union in 1959 was authentic. One of the originators of the hypothesis that Oswald was not a genuine defector but an intelligence agent was author Harold Weisberg. But after nearly 40 years of pioneering research, Weisberg acknowledged that the Warren Commission “checked into almost every breath [Oswald] drew,”⁷³ and candidly admitted to Vincent Bugliosi that “much as it looks like Oswald was some kind of agent for somebody, I have not found a shred of evidence to support it, and he never had an extra penny.”⁷⁴

Not-So-Cold Warriors

The theory that may well be the most far-fetched nevertheless demands close attention, as it picks upon psychological wounds that, for many who lived through the 1960s and 1970s, never fully healed. In the long, bitter aftermath of the Vietnam War, understandable psychological factors like grief, regret, and nostalgia for a Golden Age, however illusory—writers began mythologizing the “Camelot” of JFK’s administration within weeks of his demise⁷⁵—have inspired tendentious interpretations of how Kennedy might have saved us from the horrors and shame of Vietnam, had he only lived. Once confined to the fringes, such notions went mainstream with the success of Oliver Stone’s *JFK*, which endorsed the idea that high-ranking members of the military-industrial complex executed President Kennedy because he posed a serious threat to the war machine and its attendant profits.

According to Stone, a once-secret document, National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 263, proves that JFK intended to withdraw from Vietnam by the end of 1965, beginning with the removal

of 1,000 advisors by the end of 1963. But, as the document states, this was based on assurances by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor that “the major part of the U.S. military task can be completed by the end of 1965... [B]y the end of this year, the U.S. program for training Vietnamese should have progressed to the point where 1,000 U.S. military personnel assigned to South Vietnam can be withdrawn.” These plans were contingent upon the success of U.S. efforts to stabilize South Vietnam’s security and end the repressive policies of its increasingly tyrannical government. If these conditions were not met, U.S. involvement would continue.⁷⁶ Historian Stanley Karnow explains:

Early in 1963, South Vietnam’s rigid President Ngo Dinh Diem was cracking down on internal dissidents, throwing the country into chaos. Fearing that the turmoil would benefit the Communist insurgents, Kennedy conceived of bringing home one thousand of the sixteen thousand American military advisers as a way of prodding Diem into behaving more leniently. Kennedy’s decision was codified in National Security Action Memorandum, or NSAM 263. Its aim was to “indicate our displeasure” with Diem and “create significant uncertainty” in him “as to the future intentions of the United States.” Kennedy hoped the scheme, which also scheduled a reduction of the U.S. forces over the next two years, would give the South Vietnamese the chance to strengthen themselves.⁷⁷

The strategy was unsuccessful, resulting in Kennedy’s acquiescence to the November 1, 1963, military coup that toppled the Diem regime and, as noted in the Pentagon Papers, inadvertently deepened U.S. involvement in Vietnam.⁷⁸

Had the President really decided to withdraw from Vietnam? In July of 1963, he stated, “In my opinion, for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam, but Southeast Asia, so we are going to stay there.”⁷⁹ On September 2, Kennedy stated, in an interview with Walter Cronkite, “I don’t agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake.” One week later, he was asked if he had “any reason to doubt this so-called ‘domino theory,’ that if South Vietnam falls, the rest of Southeast Asia will go behind it?” “No, I believe it. I believe it,” JFK responded. “I think we should stay.”

There is conflicting evidence about JFK’s attitude during the post-coup period (by which time, Oliver Stone and the other theorists insist the conspiracy to kill him was already well underway).⁸⁰

The day he left for Dallas, Kennedy met with Michael Forrestal, assistant to national security advisor McGeorge Bundy, whom he reportedly told, “I want to start a complete and very profound review of how we got into this country; what we thought we were doing; and what we now think we can do. I even want to think about whether or not we should be there.”⁸¹ Longtime aide Kenneth O’Donnell said that Kennedy told him that he was beginning to think about withdrawal.⁸² JFK even allegedly told anti-war Oregon senator Wayne Morse, “Wayne, I want you to know you’re absolutely right in your criticism of my Vietnam policy. Keep this in mind. I’m in the midst of an intensive study which substantiates your position on Vietnam.”⁸³

A 1991 *Newsweek* article noted that such reports, “even if not colored by wishful memories, could have been tinged with politics. And the 1,000-man withdrawal—around 6 percent of the total—was just a token that might never have been repeated. McGeorge Bundy... doesn’t believe it signified any shift of policy. ‘I don’t think we know what he would have done if he’d lived,’ Bundy said last week. ‘I don’t know, and I don’t know anyone who does know.’”⁸⁴ Secretary of State Dean Rusk was also skeptical that JFK was planning to withdraw: “I had hundreds of talks with John F. Kennedy about Vietnam, and never once did he say anything of this sort to his own secretary of state.”⁸⁵

In Fort Worth, Texas, on the morning of November 22, Kennedy made his last statement about Vietnam: “Without the United States, South Vietnam would collapse overnight.”⁸⁶ At the moment JFK was cut down, he was only minutes away from delivering a speech at the Dallas Trade Mart, in which he had planned to reaffirm his commitment not only to Vietnam, but another eight countries located on or near the border of the Communist bloc. “Our assistance to these nations can be painful, risky and costly,” the text of the speech reads. “But we dare not weary of the task.”⁸⁷

The following year, the slain President’s closest advisor and confidant, Robert F. Kennedy, discussed his brother’s views in a Kennedy Library oral history interview with John Bartlow Martin. “The President... had a strong, overwhelming reason for being in Vietnam and [believing] that we should win the war in Vietnam,” RFK stated, “[it would mean] the loss of all of Southeast Asia if you lost Vietnam. ... [which would] have profound effects as far as our position throughout the world, and our position in a rather vital part of the world.” “There was never any consideration given to pulling out?”

he was asked. “No,” Kennedy replied.⁸⁸

Following a personal investigation into the roots of political uprisings in Asia and Latin America the following year, Robert Kennedy’s views on Vietnam began to change,⁸⁹ reflecting RFK aide Adam Wolinsky’s concern that not only was the U.S. pursuing a “foreign policy based on force, a reliance on military pressure almost to the complete exclusion of politics,” but also—and crucially—“a simplistic equation of revolution with communist conspiracy.”⁹⁰ Once he began criticizing the Johnson administration’s Vietnam policies, RFK would have had much to gain politically by suggesting that his evolving views had been influenced by his late brother. But instead, he candidly admitted to confidant Arthur Schlesinger, “Well, I don’t know what would be best: to say that he [JFK] didn’t spend much time thinking about Vietnam; or to say that he did and messed it up.”⁹¹

As journalist Tom Wicker notes, “Kennedy might not have expanded the war as President Johnson did in 1964,” however, “It seems less likely that Kennedy had already decided, at the time of his death, to extricate the nation from the quagmire of Vietnam... I know of no reputable historian who has documented Kennedy’s intentions, much less found them the motive for his murder.”⁹²

Wiseguys

When all else fails, conspiracists can always try to pin the assassination on organized crime. That’s what G. Robert Blakey did. Blakey had worked under Robert Kennedy at the Justice Department and drafted the landmark Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO act)—anti-racketeering legislation that was signed into law in 1970. As Chief Counsel to the HSCA, he took it upon himself to explain who had been responsible for the conspiracy indicated by the committee’s acoustical theory, something the committee declined to do. As the HSCA ended its investigation, Blakey held a press conference to announce, “I am now firmly of the opinion that the Mob did it. It is a historical truth. The Committee report does not say the Mob did it. *I* said it. I think the Mob did it.”⁹³

But, as with other suspects, the actual evidence is slim. Journalist Richard Billings, Blakey’s co-author on the HSCA Report as well as Blakey’s own conspiracy book, *The Plot to Kill the President*, summarizes it this way: “The main piece of evidence of Organized Crime complicity in the conspiracy is Jack Ruby. ... [I]f you’re going to determine the final answer to this crime, the murder of the president, the character of Ruby is crucial.”⁹⁴ This is bad news for

conspiracy theorists. As *Dallas Morning News* columnist Tony Zoppi, who knew Ruby quite well, puts it, “It is so ludicrous to believe that Ruby was part of the mob. The conspiracy theorists want to believe everybody but those who really knew him. . . . He was a real talker, a fellow who would talk your ear off if he had the chance. You have to be crazy to think anybody would have trusted Ruby to be a part of the mob. He couldn’t keep a secret for five minutes.”⁹⁵

As Vincent Bugliosi points out, Ruby’s personality could hardly be less like that of a cool, calculating, professional hit man: “FBI agents may have interviewed close to one hundred people who *knew Ruby well*, and in their published reports in the Warren Commission volumes the reader would be hard-pressed to find one interviewee who did not mention Ruby’s temper, or at least how ‘very emotional’ he was, if the question of Ruby’s temperament was discussed.”⁹⁶ He was prone to sudden, sometimes savage bursts of violence. William Serur knew Ruby for over a decade, and said that Ruby “explodes and gets mad quicker than any person I ever saw.”⁹⁷ As he recalled, “In the last few years I thought he might have been suffering from some form of . . . mental disturbance, by the way he acted.”⁹⁸ In fact, evidence brought out at Ruby’s trial showed that Ruby suffered from organic brain damage.⁹⁹ “I don’t think he is sane,” said one stripper who worked for him.¹⁰⁰ American Guild of Variety Artists official Johnnie Hayden called Ruby a “kook” because of his unpredictable and erratic outbursts.¹⁰¹ Edward Pullman, whose wife worked for Ruby, called him “insane. He was a psycho. . . . He was not right.”¹⁰²

Ruby was many things: small-time nightclub operator, unsuccessful entrepreneur, barroom brawler, police groupie, would-be FBI informant (it didn’t work out, as the Bureau concluded that he simply had no useful information to offer).¹⁰³ However, there is one thing he was not: a criminal. So says Bill Alexander, who prosecuted Ruby for Oswald’s murder and sought the death penalty against him. “He didn’t steal. He didn’t pimp. He wasn’t a drunk. Jack wasn’t a lawbreaker.”¹⁰⁴

Testifying before the HSCA, Jack Revill of the Dallas police’s criminal intelligence section rejected the idea that Ruby had any involvement with organized crime. “Jack Ruby was the type of person who would have been *acquainted* with persons involved in gambling activities and other criminal activities, but as far as Jack Ruby being actively engaged or a member of any groups, no . . . Jack Ruby was a buffoon. He liked the limelight. He was highly volatile. He liked to be recognized with people, and I would say this to

this committee: if Jack Ruby was a member of organized crime, then the personnel director of organized crime should be replaced.”¹⁰⁵

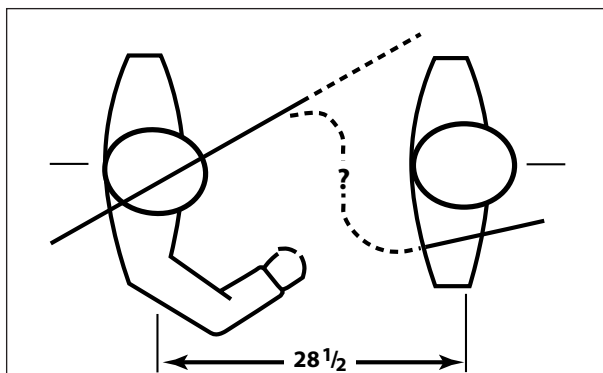
Nevertheless, conspiracy theorists commonly insist that if Ruby can be shown to have been (to use Revell’s term) *acquainted* with suspicious characters, then surely that must prove something. The most oft-repeated allegation is that Ruby made a number of phone calls to Mob-connected individuals in the months prior to the assassination, as documented in black and white by his telephone records. Is this evidence that the Mafia ordered Oswald’s murder or the Kennedy assassination?

No. “Correlation does not mean causation.”¹⁰⁶ Just because one event follows another does not mean they are connected. In fact, a great deal of testimony indicates that the phone calls in question were related to Ruby’s professional grievances with the American Guild of Variety Artists (AGVA), which represented the strippers he employed at his nightclub. The AGVA “was riddled with corruption and compromised by its mob connections,”¹⁰⁷ so anyone dealing with the AGVA could have been rubbing shoulders with the Mob, whether they realized it or not. There is no evidence that Ruby had any significant relationship to organized crime or that any of his phone calls or actions were related to a conspiracy. (In fact, genuine Mob connections would have been *most* helpful in his lengthy and frustrating battles with the AGVA.)¹⁰⁸

The Assassin

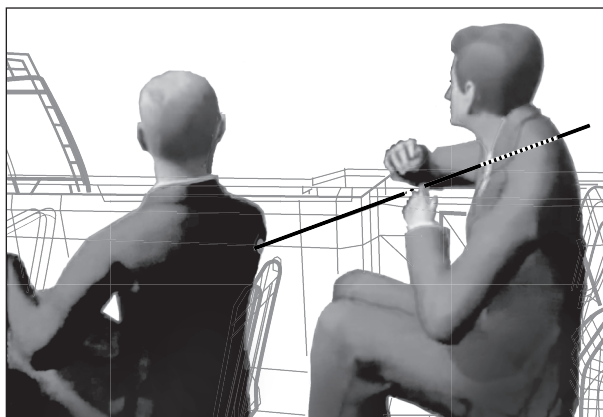
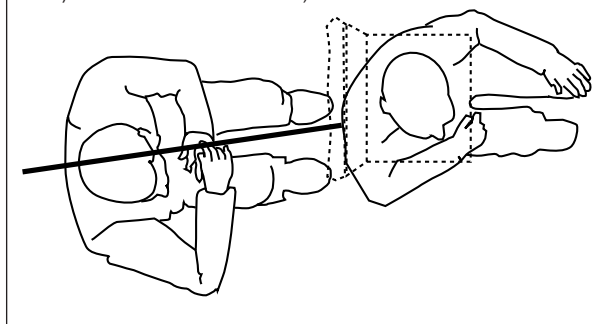
How do we navigate a path through the complex morass of claims, speculation, rumors, and confusion that seems to hopelessly engulf this subject? We use critical thinking tools to discern the most reliable evidence.

Immediately following the assassination, eyewitnesses directed police to two areas in Dealey Plaza: behind the stockade fence on the grassy knoll, from which many thought they had heard shots (but where no one had actually *seen* a gunman)¹⁰⁹ and the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, where a gunman had been sighted.¹¹⁰ A thorough search of the grassy knoll area turned up no evidence of any kind: no suspect, no weapon, no spent shells, and no other evidence of a crime. The Book Depository was another story: police found shipping cartons of books arranged by a southeast corner window into a sniper’s perch—where someone could sit and aim a rifle out the window—surrounded by a wall of cartons that hid the corner from the rest of the sixth floor. Three spent rifle shells were found nearby. A bolt-action,



(Above) Inaccurate Single Bullet Theory diagrams typically have Governor Connally facing straight forward and seated directly in line with President Kennedy. The author has also selected an extreme angle for the shot—just enough to completely miss Connally. (Redrawn from Robert Groden and Harrison Edward Livingstone's book *High Treason*).

(Below) A more accurate representation: Governor Connally sat on a small jump seat placed a few inches to Kennedy's left. At the time of the "Single Bullet" shot he had shifted his upper body sharply to the right. (Redrawn from an overhead shot of Dale Myers' animation of the assassination. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSBXW1-VGmM>).



Dale Myers' highly accurate, 3D computer model allows us to view the assassination from any angle. Here we see the trajectory of the bullet that struck the President and Governor Connally at approximately frame 223 of the Zapruder film. The jump seat in which Connally sat was three inches lower than the back seat, where the President was. (Redrawn from Dale Myers' animation of the assassination: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSBXW1-VGmM>. For extensive information about how the computer model was created see <http://www.jfkfiles.com/index.html>).

Italian, Mannlicher-Carcano rifle was found stashed between boxes on the opposite side of the floor, on the way to the stairwell. Ballistic markings as distinctive as fingerprints proved that the three shells had been fired from that rifle to the exclusion of all others. One nearly intact bullet and several bullet fragments were recovered from the presidential limousine and at Parkland Hospital; the bullet and the two largest of the recovered fragments were proved by ballistic markings—again, as distinctive as fingerprints—to have been fired from that rifle.¹¹¹

Who owned the rifle? Documentary evidence assembled over the next two days established that the weapon had been purchased through the mail under an assumed name by Lee Harvey Oswald, one of the few Book Depository employees who had not gone outside to watch the motorcade. Oswald's palm print was found on the weapon, and fingerprints lifted from the trigger housing were later determined to be his.¹¹² Handwriting experts unanimously agreed that it was Oswald's handwriting on the order form, as well as on the paperwork for the post office box where he had the rifle delivered.¹¹³ It was not necessary for the police to launch a manhunt for Oswald: he was already under arrest for the murder of police officer J. D. Tippit, gunned down approximately 45 minutes after the President's murder. Oswald had fled the scene of the crime, taken a cab to the room he rented in suburban Oak Cliff, apparently picked up the handgun he had also purchased through the mail, and then killed the first police officer he encountered.¹¹⁴

The autopsy of the President—as well as the medical examination of Texas Governor John Connally, who was critically wounded during the shooting but survived—confirmed that the shots had come from above and behind the limousine, not the grassy knoll.¹¹⁵ Later reviews of the autopsy photographs and X-rays by panels of forensic experts appointed by Attorney General Ramsey Clark in 1968, the Rockefeller Commission in 1975, and the HSCA in 1978 affirmed the conclusions of the autopsy report.¹¹⁶

Following Oswald's lead ("I'm just a patsy!" he famously cried; "Don't believe all that so-called evidence," he told his brother)¹¹⁷, it has become an article of faith for many conspiracy theorists that any hard evidence implicating Oswald must be forged: the autopsy report, the autopsy photographs and X-rays, the ballistic evidence, the crime scene evidence, the handwriting evidence, the "backyard photos" of Oswald with the murder weapon—all forged. The HSCA's panel of photographic experts subjected the autopsy materials and the backyard photographs to exhaustive tests to uncover evidence of fakery; no such evidence could be found.¹¹⁸ But the release of the committee's report in 1979 did nothing to stem the tide of speculation. No evidence was safe from accusations of forgery—not even the legendary Zapruder film or the minutely studied Moorman Polaroid, and not even excluding the slain president's body itself. Such hypotheses are constructs arising from the *a priori* assumption that Lee Oswald had been framed by evil forces capable of ruthlessly accomplishing anything they desired—anything, that is, except removing John F. Kennedy from office by any means other than a public execution in broad daylight.

The Single Bullet Theory

Of all the Warren Commission's findings, none has been so contentious as the single bullet theory, the conclusion that the bullet which inflicted the first wound to the President at the base of the neck exited his throat

and went on to inflict several wounds to Governor John B. Connally, seated in front of the President. Critics commonly suggest that the scenario was fabricated out of thin air in order to explain how a lone gunman could have fired the shots in the requisite time, as established by the Zapruder film.

According to then-Warren Commission junior counsel (and later five-term U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania) Arlen Specter, it was James J. Humes, the pathologist who supervised the autopsy of the slain President, who first voiced the possibility that JFK and Governor Connally had been struck by the same bullet.¹¹⁹ During his March 16, 1964, testimony, Humes noted that “as much as we could ascertain from our X-rays and physical examinations, this missile struck no bony structures in traversing the body of the late President.” Referring to a frame in the Zapruder film at approximately the time of the first bullet strike, Humes stated, “I see that Governor Connally is sitting directly in front of the late President, and suggest the possibility that this missile, having traversed the low neck of the late President, in fact traversed the chest of Governor Connally.”¹²⁰

If Humes was right, it would explain not only the timing of the shooting, but also where the first bullet that struck the President went after exiting his body (as no bullet was found in the car, and there was no damage from such a bullet). It would also explain why the entrance wound on Governor Connally’s back was ovoid rather than the typically round shape of a bullet entrance wound (because its passage through the President’s body caused it to yaw or tumble).¹²¹

Arlen Specter and others serving with the Warren Commission were initially skeptical of the hypothesis,¹²² but a reconstruction of the shooting by agents of the FBI and Secret Service in Dealey Plaza affirmed its plausibility.¹²³ With slight qualification, the commission endorsed the theory.¹²⁴ To Warren Commission critics, be they assassination buffs or experts as distinguished as Cyril Wecht, the hypothesis is utterly untenable. Wecht is proud to point out that he was the advisor responsible for shaping one of the most memorable scenes in Oliver Stone’s *JFK*,¹²⁵ in which the single bullet theory is ridiculed by actor Kevin Costner and denounced as “One of the grossest lies ever forced on the American people.”¹²⁶

But Wecht’s information, and therefore the widely seen portrayal of the theory, was glaringly inaccurate.¹²⁷ Wecht had been one of nine highly distinguished members of the HSCA’s forensic pathology panel,¹²⁸ and was surely aware that the panel had found his understanding of the evidence

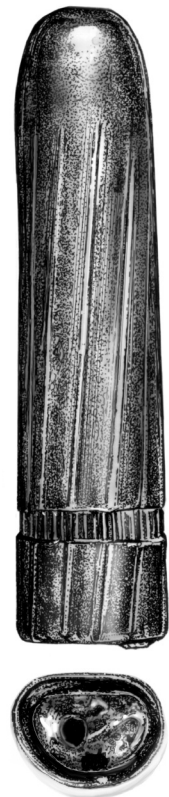
flawed and his arguments to be without merit. The panel (with Wecht’s dissent noted) concluded that the evidence unequivocally supported the single bullet theory.¹²⁹ (In response, Wecht could only speculate about possible government affiliations that could taint his colleagues’ integrity.)¹³⁰

The single bullet theory was supported by others consulted by the House committee, including photographic expert Calvin McCamy, who chaired a panel of 20 experts who utilized the Zapruder film and photogrammetric techniques to plot the precise positions of JFK and Governor Connally in the limousine;¹³¹ and NASA staff engineer Thomas Canning (that’s right, an actual rocket scientist), who plotted the trajectories of the shots that struck the two men.¹³²

Meticulous reconstructions of the shooting by the British Broadcasting Company,¹³³ the Discovery Channel,¹³⁴ and Dr. John Lattimer,¹³⁵ as well as highly accurate 3D computer models of the assassination by Failure Analysis Associates, Inc. (now Exponent),¹³⁶ and Emmy-award winning animator Dale Myers¹³⁷ have confirmed again and again the plausibility, if not certainty, of the single bullet theory. Vincent Bugliosi concludes, “‘the single-bullet theory’ is an obvious misnomer. Though in its incipient stages it was but a theory, the indisputable evidence is that it is now a proven fact, a wholly supported conclusion.”¹³⁸

Cui Bono, Redux

Why did Oswald do it? The Warren Commission heard testimony and examined psychological evaluations from his teen years suggesting he was a greatly troubled individual.¹³⁹ He had documented in his own words the contempt he felt for the capitalist system of government and the United States in particular.¹⁴⁰ The commission heard testimony indicating a history of violence, from the time he threatened his sister-in-law with a knife as a teen,¹⁴¹ to the numerous witnesses who testified about the physical abuse he directed at his wife.¹⁴² Documentary evidence supports his widow’s testimony that Oswald had made a failed assassination attempt against local radical right extremist Major General Edwin Walker, a vehement detractor of Oswald’s idol, Fidel Castro.¹⁴³ Oswald’s interest in Castro, of course, is well documented, including his pro-Cuba street protests in the summer of 1963, and his failed attempt to secure a visa to Cuba in October of that year.¹⁴⁴ The commission heard testimony that Oswald aspired to greatness, though greatness had thus far eluded him;¹⁴⁵ that he believed that societal change could only be brought about by violent means;¹⁴⁶ that he had access to information published in 1963 indicating that



The Single Bullet Found at Dallas’ Parkland Memorial Hospital on a gurney that had borne Governor Connally, it is also known as the “magic” or “pristine” bullet. From the side the bullet appears unaltered except for a small amount of lead that has been squeezed past the bottom edge. But the end-on view reveals the formerly round bullet is far from pristine.



Actual size 1 1/4 "

the Kennedy administration was seeking to remove Castro from power using covert, violent methods.¹⁴⁷

Oswald never confessed to the assassination, so it is impossible to state definitively what his motives were. But when a mentally unstable, radically leftist, violently inclined Castro idolater like Oswald, with aspirations to greatness and a belief in the power of violence to enact political change, murders the man who is at once the personification of a social structure he despises and the man Fidel Castro has singled out as his greatest enemy, and who already made an assassination attempt on Major General Walker, it makes sense.

The Campfire of History

As author David Aaronovitch discusses in his book, *Voodoo Histories*, it has become fashionable in recent years to defend conspiracy theories—even politically incorrect to challenge them—regardless of their truth or falsity. When *New York Times* reporter Nicholas Kulish criticized film director Spike Lee for making “utterly unfounded charges that the failed levees [in Louisiana during Hurricane Katrina] were blown up to flood poor black neighborhoods,” Kulish was attacked for denying the “alternative perspectives” of black Louisiana residents. “In other words,” Aaronovitch observes, “the possible untruth of the allegations was far less important than the bigger truths [supposedly] revealed by them. So, in that sense, arguing about whether there really had been a conspiracy was not just beside the point, but amounted to an attempt to try and deny the larger alternative truth.”¹⁴⁸

This is an approach that dovetails with an intellectual trend, loosely labeled postmodernist or post-structuralist, which has become increasingly attractive to academics and intellectuals in recent years. One aspect of this inclination is a distrust of normative notions of truth. ‘You show me your reality,’ it suggests, ‘I’ll show you mine,’ and the man in Maine with a lobster in his hand will show you his. All accounts of events are essentially stories, and no single account ought to be privileged above another. It is a seductive and not entirely worthless way of looking at the world.¹⁴⁹

Similarly, Oliver Stone once posed the question, “What is history? Some people say it’s a bunch of gossip made up by soldiers who passed it around a campfire. They say such and such happened. They create, they make it bigger, they make it better. . . . The nature of human beings is that they exaggerate. So, what is history? Who the fuck knows?”¹⁵⁰

In their reliance on inherently unreliable eyewitness testimony; in lay interpretations of forensic evidence (such as the “head snap” in the Zapruder film); in invocations of pseudo- or junk science (like the acoustical theory endorsed by the HSCA); in confusing rumors or even pure speculation for reality¹⁵¹ (Oswald was a secret agent, Ruby was a mobster, Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. were killed by the same men who killed JFK; it’s all connected); in the rationalization

of failure after failure¹⁵² (evidence implicates Oswald, so it must be forged; experts interpret evidence as disproof of a conspiracy theory, so they must be lying); in the use of after-the-fact reasoning¹⁵³ (Ruby killed Oswald, so Ruby must be connected to the assassination; Ruby made phone calls to Mob-related individuals, so the Mob must have killed JFK); in the failure to understand the role of coincidence and the significance of representativeness¹⁵⁴ (events such as the deaths of alleged witnesses—no matter whether they *really* were witnesses or not—cannot possibly be a coincidence; it must be a conspiracy); in their systematic embrace of methods such as these, the Warren Commission critics (and—*mea culpa*—I used to be one of them) have been and remain wrong. The conspiracy theories stem from logical fallacies, not legitimate arguments.

But that is not the end of the story.

Corrosion

Recent research conducted by Viren Swami at the University of Westminster in England found that believers in conspiracy theories “are more likely to be cynical about the world in general and politics in particular,” writes science journalist Maggie Koerth-Baker. “Conspiracy theories also seem to be more compelling to those with low self-worth, especially with regard to their sense of agency in the world at large. Conspiracy theories appear to be a way of reacting to uncertainty and powerlessness.”¹⁵⁵ “If you know the truth and others don’t, that’s one way you can reassert feelings of having agency,” Swami says. “It can be comforting to do your own research even if that research is flawed,” notes Koerth-Baker. “It feels good to be the wise old goat in a flock of sheep.”¹⁵⁶

And, really, where is the harm? We accuse the government of criminal actions; so what? We *know* agents of the government frequently engage in unethical and illegal acts; so *why not* point fingers? Is it really such a bad thing if some of the specific charges happen not to be true?

Of course it is. Facts matter. The truth matters. Reckless accusations can never be justified, regardless of one’s intentions. And new research suggests that conspiracy theories in themselves can actually be quite harmful. “Psychologists aren’t sure whether powerlessness causes conspiracy theories or vice versa,” writes Maggie Koerth-Baker. “Either way, the current scientific thinking suggests these beliefs are nothing more than an extreme form of cynicism, a turning away from politics and traditional media—which only perpetuates the problem.”¹⁵⁷ Research conducted by psychologist Karen Douglas and Daniel Jolley at the University of Kent in England showed that people exposed to conspiracy theories were more likely than others to withdraw from participation in the democratic process.¹⁵⁸

It gets worse. Research conducted by Stephan Lewandowsky and others at the University of Western Australia School of Psychology found that belief in conspiracy theories significantly predicted a subject’s rejection of scientific

findings such as climate science, the correlation between HIV and AIDS, and the link between smoking and lung cancer. The authors note, “Our results provide empirical support for previous suggestions that conspiratorial thinking contributes to the rejection of science.”¹⁵⁹

Research shows that those who believe AIDS was created by the government are less likely to practice protected sex.¹⁶⁰ “And if you believe that governments or corporations are hiding evidence that vaccines harm children,” Koerth-Baker notes, “you’re less likely to have your children vaccinated. The result: pockets of measles and whooping-cough infections and a few deaths in places with low child-vaccination rates.”¹⁶¹

Conspiracy theories can actually kill you.

Cause for Hope

Of course, there is a way out of all this: base your beliefs on facts, not the other way around. Dare to be, like James Randi, “obsessed with reality.” By embracing the reality of the past instead of myths, we can make the most of the present and map out a better future.

For some, the era of Kennedy is remembered as “Camelot,” a Golden Age. To others, it was a time of persistent racial segregation, oppression, and violence; the Cold War and the arms race; and bloody, tragically misunderstood uprisings in Southeast Asia and Latin America. One may find many things to admire about JFK without turning a blind eye to his lack of effectiveness in advancing the civil rights legislation he championed, his secret war against Cuba, or his lapses in judgment with regard to personal behavior that threatened to compromise the integrity and security of his office.

But even if JFK was the white knight some would make him out to be, did his death really reverse the direction of politics in the United States? British scholar Peter Knight asks, “If the Kennedy assassination is the result of a conspiracy by reac-

tionary forces to pervert the course of history, as self-professed liberals such as Oliver Stone claim, then what about civil rights, feminism, gay and lesbian rights, and the ecology movement? Conspiratorial accounts of the political shootings of the 1960s as the moment when everything went wrong thus require a certain blindness to the progressive landmarks of that decade and after.”¹⁶²

In the final analysis (as he himself was wont to say), those who seek to honor John F. Kennedy’s memory would be best advised to honor the goals he set for the nation and the freedoms and institutions he pledged to uphold, and to participate in the democracy he pledged to serve.

Though much has changed in the world, we might recall some of the words with which President Kennedy challenged friend and foe alike at his 1961 inauguration:

Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us. . . .

Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors. Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths, and encourage the arts and commerce.

Let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah—to “undo the heavy burdens. . . and to let the oppressed go free.”

And if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion, let both sides join in creating a new endeavor, not a new balance of power, but a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved.

All this will not be finished in the first 100 days. Nor will it be finished in the first 1,000 days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin.¹⁶³ **S**

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