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In an excerpt from his new book, one of America's most acclaimed authors examines the emotions and the motives of the man who killed JFK.

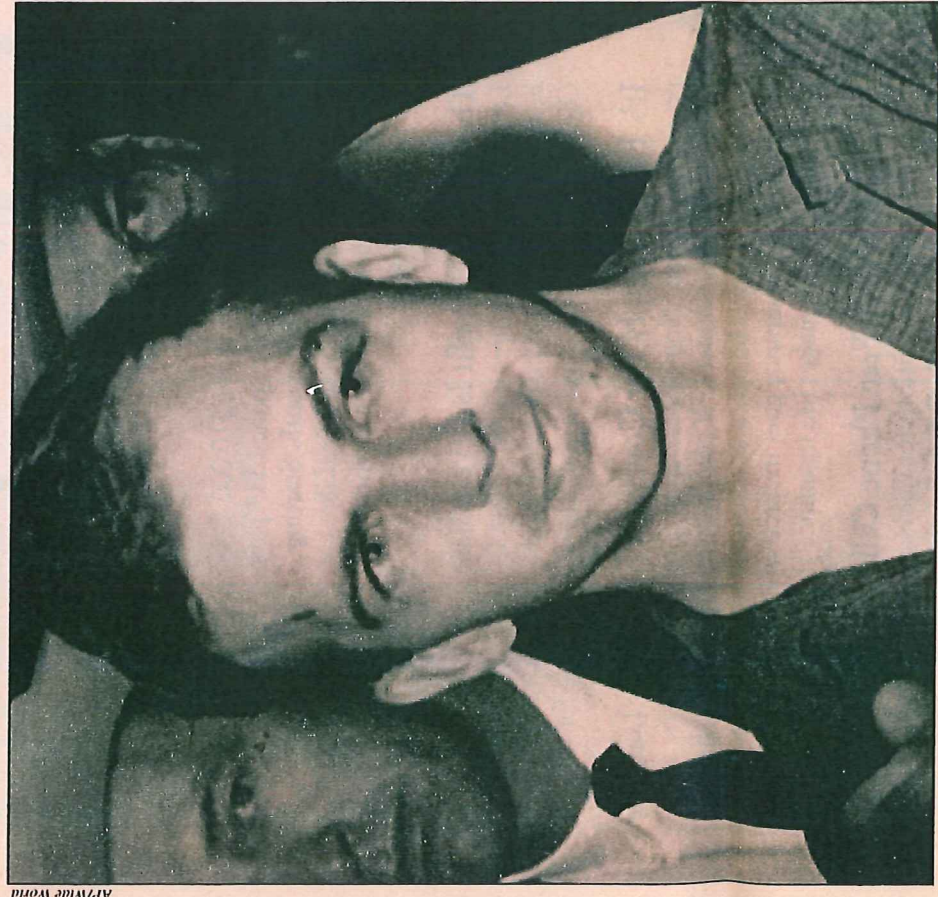
Why Did Oswald Choose Kennedy?

From "Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery"

BY NORMAN MAILER

In a probing analysis of Lee Harvey Oswald, the author Norman Mailer looks carefully and critically

What American



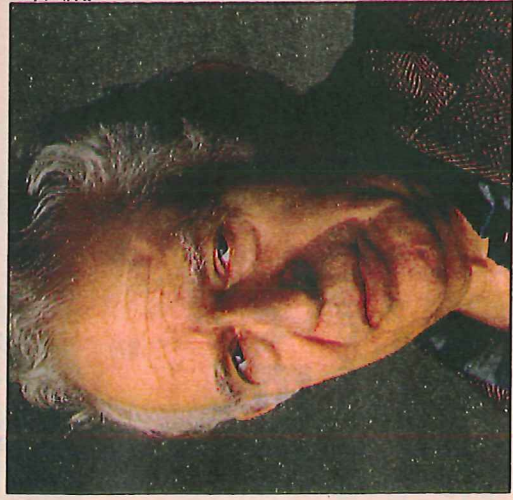
AP/Wide World

WHAT OSWALD DO IT?

DIf one's answer is to come out of anything larger than an opinion, it is necessary to contend with questions of evidence. In that direction, however, one encounters a jungle of facts and expert estimates as to whether Oswald could fire the shots in time, was a good enough marksman, was the only gunman in Dealey Plaza, and on one can go, trying to explore into every last reach of possibility, only to encounter a disheartening truth: Evidence, by itself, will never provide the answer to a mystery. For it is in the nature of evidence to produce, sooner or later, a counter-interpretation to itself in the form of a contending expert in a court of law.

This applies to the question of Oswald's marksmanship. He is judged by various people, depending on the needs of the ax they grind, to be a poor rifleman, a fair one, a good one, or virtually an expert. Much the same has been stated about the difficulty of the shot itself. It has been estimated to be every-

The celebrated novelist Norman Mailer has written a new nonfiction book titled "Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery," just published by Random House. It centers upon the life of Lee Harvey Oswald, including a detailed study of his nearly two years in the Soviet Union and his relationship with Castro's Cuba. To gather his information, Mailer spent months in Russia, talking with people who had known Oswald there, as well as interviewing members of his family, friends and associates who knew him here. His documentary sources include newly available KGB files, the Warren Commission report and other studies analyzing the Kennedy assassination case from all sides. PARADE is privileged to present the following excerpt adapted from the concluding portion of Mailer's book.



Lee Harvey Oswald (top), shown in custody after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, is the subject of a new study by the author Norman Mailer (above).

pert testified, to nearly impossible.

Such a debate is, however, moot. A rifleman can fire with accuracy one day and be far off target on another. Why should we ascribe any more consistency to a man with a gun (in the equivalent of combat conditions) than we would expect from a professional basketball player, whose accuracy often varies dramatically from night to night?

Moreover, we are dealing with Oswald. He could be hysterical on one occasion and, on another, the coolest man in the room. The distance between his best and worst performances is almost all of his activities is enacted over a wide spectrum. The real question is not whether Oswald had the skills to bring

off the deed, but whether he had the soul of a killer. Yet, the formulation is too simple. It could be said that everybody alive is, potentially, under sufficient stress, a murderer, a suicide, or capable of both. Phrased more closely, the question becomes: Would Oswald, pushed to such an extreme, have the soul of a killer?

We know a great deal about Oswald by now. Assuming that the facts chosen by the author have been salient—a sizable assumption when dealing with Lee Harvey—it is still difficult not to believe that he pulled the trigger.

Despite every personal inclination to find Oswald innocent or, at least, part of a conspiracy, the gloomy verdict is that he had the character to kill Kennedy and that he probably did it alone. This conclusion now stated, one must

rush to add that a good lawyer in a trial venue outside of Dallas might well have gotten him off—ridicule of the "magic bullet" would have drilled many a hole through the body of evidence amassed by the prosecution. Besides, no one can be certain that our protagonist was not only the killer but also

was alone. The odds in favor of one's personal conclusion can be no better than, let us say, three out of four that he is definitively guilty and the sole actor in the assassination.

Too much is still unknown about CIA and FBI involvement with Oswald to offer any greater conviction.

There are, for example, other possibilities to be remarked upon. While one is certainly not going to enter the nearly impenetrable controversy in acoustics that would prove or disprove whether



BY NORMAN MAILER

COVER PHOTOGRAPHS FROM AP/WIDE WORLD (OSWALD) AND ARCHIVE PHOTOS (KENNEDY)

PAGE 4 • MAY 14, 1995 • PARADE MAGAZINE

at the assassin who became our "First Ghost."

Haunts Us More?

a fourth shot was fired from the grassy knoll—delineation of character, not exposition of sound-wave charts is the aim of this work!—one would not be surprised that if there was, indeed, another shot, it was not necessarily fired by a conspirator of Oswald's. Such a gun could have belonged to another lone killer or to a conspirator working for a group unattached to Lee Harvey. It is not inconceivable that two gunmen with wholly separate purposes both fired in the same lacerated few seconds of time.

All the same, none of that conflicts with the premise that Oswald—so far as he knew—was a lone gunman. Every insight we have gained of him suggests the solitary nature of his act. Besides, it is too difficult, no matter how one searches for a viable scenario, to believe that others could have chosen him

JFK as, relatively speaking, a good President, and he liked him. Or so he professed. Given Oswald's reflexive impulse to lie at the drop of a hat, one could question whether he was not paying lip service precisely to conceal any

he probably did like Kennedy as much as he could approve of a conventional politician but that, finally, such sentiments had very little to do with his act. He would not be shooting at Kennedy because he liked him or disliked him—

he would have seen it, a superior dedication, and the potential to develop the character of a man like Lenin. If we know that he had none of Lenin's capacity to achieve large goals both philosophically and organizationally, Oswald did hold an equally intense belief in that fabulous end which would justify all his quotidian means. His deepest despair had to arise in those moments when he could not see himself any longer as a major protagonist in the forging of a new world.

The odds are that Oswald's political ideology had finally come to rest in the live nerve of nihilism—things had to get vastly worse before they could get better. We can refer ourselves back to a note he wrote on Holland-America Line stationery even as he may have been returning from his stay in the Soviet Union to America:

As Oswald saw it, an explosion at the heart of the American establishment would be exactly the shock therapy needed to awaken the world.

that would be irrelevant to the depth of his deed. The question has then shifted. Recognizing that we speak of it as a likelihood that Oswald is guilty rather than as a found conclusion, what then, if he was guilty, happened to be the real intent of his deed? The answer speaks out of our understanding of him: It was the largest opportunity he had ever been offered. The assassination of a President would be seismographic in its effect. For Americans, the after-shocks would not cease for the rest of the century. Yet he would also be punishing the Russians and the Cubans. They would suffer side effects for decades to come. But then, he was above capitalism and he was above communism. Both! He had, as



Right: Oswald hands out pro-Castro leaflets in New Orleans on Aug. 16, 1963. Below: President and Mrs. Kennedy in the motorcade in Dallas moments before JFK's assassination.



The Bettmann Archive

to be the rifleman in a conspiracy.

We are back then, to the last question: Why did Oswald choose Kennedy?

Every account of his sentiments by every witness who recalls his occasional remarks about Jack Kennedy agrees—that rarest of phenomena for evidence! There is whole consensus that he saw

hint, especially to his wife, Marina, that he had such a project of assassination already in his mind. Given the absence, however, of any opportunity in Dallas or New Orleans to be close enough to the throne to commit such an act until the last couple of weeks in November, the more reasonable assumption is that

Kennedy had the ability to give hope to the American ethos. He was not, as American Presidents went, a bad President; therefore, he was too good. As Oswald saw it, the world was in crisis, and the social need was to create a new kind of society. Otherwise, the malignant effects of capitalism, added to the Soviet degradation of communism, were going to reduce people to the point where they lost all will to create a better world.

An explosion at the heart of the American establishment's complacency would be exactly the shock therapy needed to awaken the world.

It is doubtful that Oswald wanted to debate such a question with himself. He may well have possessed an instinct that told him he had to do something enormous and do it quickly, do it for his own physical well-being. The murderer kills in order to cure himself—which is why murder is properly repudiated. It is the most selfish of acts.

Back in March, he had said in a letter to his brother, Robert Oswald, "It's always better to take advantage of your chances as they come along."

continued

OUR FIRST GHOST/continued

Which may have been Oswald's way of saying that the intent of the universe is ready to reveal itself to us by the chances we are offered. Since the President would pass beneath his Texas School Book Depository windows, he did not have the right to violate such a monumental opportunity. Could there be another person in the universe who had been more uniquely designed to take advantage of such a situation?

Even if he were captured and put on trial, he would be guaranteed a very high level of attention. And if he were convicted, he had the temperament to live alone in a cell; he was more than half habituated to that already. He could even view his life up to this point as a preparation for spending many years in prison.

Indeed, it may even have been the thought of his trial that fired him on. What a podium! Such a trial could alter history, stimulate the stupid, rouse the lethargic, confound the powerful. So he had to feel divided between his desire to escape and his recognition that capture, trial and incarceration might generate a vastly larger destiny.

His personal attitude toward Kennedy had little to do, therefore, with his act. In war, one may execute a man for whom one feels respect or even personal affection; Oswald saw it as an execution. One mighty leader was going to be dispatched by another high and mighty personage—of the future. The future would preempt the present.

If he failed to escape, well, he could tell his story. He could becloud the issue and possibly be acquitted, and if it came to 20 years of prison, he would be able to forge his political agenda—even as Hitler, Stalin and Lenin had done. Should he face capital punishment, then, at the least, he would be immortal. He would take care of that in his trial. He would tell his story and expound his ideas.

What he may never have taken into account is that the forces he set loose would devour him before he could tell that story. The first element in the loss of a heroic trial became the four shots he fired into Police Officer J.D. Tippit. There can be little doubt that he panicked. As soon as he killed Tippit, the mighty architecture of his ideology, hundreds of levels high and built with no more than the game cards of his political imagination, came tumbling down. He knew Americans well enough to recognize that some might listen to his ideas if he killed a President, but nearly all would be repelled by any gunman who would mow down a cop, a family man—that act was small



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enough to void interest in every large idea he wished to introduce. By killing Tippit, he had wrecked his grand plan to be one of the oracles of history.

It may never have occurred to Oswald that the obfuscation and paranoia which followed the assassination of Kennedy would contribute immensely to the sludge and smog of the world's spirit.

Oswald may never have read Emerson, but the following passage from the essay "Heroism" gives us luminous insight into what had to be Oswald's opinion of himself as he sat on the sixth floor waiting for the Kennedy motorcade—he was committing himself to the most heroic deed of which he was capable.

Self-trust is the essence of heroism. It is the state of the soul at war, and its ultimate objects are the last defiance of falsehood and wrong, and the power to bear all that can be inflicted by evil agents. [Heroism is] scornful of petty calculations and scornful of being scorned. It persists; it is of an undaunted boldness and of a fortitude not to be wearied out. Its jest is the littleness of common life. [Heroism] works in contradiction to the voice of mankind and in contradiction, for a time, to the voice of the great and good. Heroism is obedience to a secret impulse of an individual's character. Now to no other man can wisdom appear as it does to him, for every man must be supposed to see a little farther on his own proper path than anyone else [so] every heroic act measures itself by its contempt of some external good...

It would have wounded Oswald to the quick if he had known that history would not see him as a hero but as an anti-hero. He went off to work that last morning, leaving the dregs of instant coffee in a plastic cup, and in two days he ascended to the top of the list of our national obsessions—he became our First Ghost.

Oswald owned all the elements that cohere in a ghost—ambition, deceit, a sense of mission, and the untold frustration of an abrupt death just as a long-held dream of personal prominence was about to unfold. Can there be any American of our century who, having failed to gain stature while he was alive, now haunts us more?

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