

**PAUL COATES**

# Press-Agentry at Its Worst

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There is, in this business, a precise routine for the handling of press releases sent out by hyper-active and over-imaginative publicity men.

Any properly trained reporter can transfer a sheaf of them from desk to wastebasket within six seconds. Seven, at the outside.

But I've just broken training. After all these years, I finally read a whole press release. This infraction of the rules wasn't really my fault. I got tricked into it by an altogether revolting first paragraph.

"Mrs. Marguerite Oswald, mother of President Kennedy's assassin," it read, "charged today that her son may have been involved with the United States Secret Service in a 'mercy killing' conspiracy to remove the President from office because he was suffering from an 'incurable disease.'

"Mrs. Oswald's theory was revealed by writer Jean Stafford in a copyrighted interview in the current issue of McCall's.

"'President Kennedy was a dying man,' Mrs. Oswald asserted. 'He had Atkinson's disease, which is a disease of the kidney, and we know that he had three operations on his back and that he would have been a lingering President.

"'So I say it is possible that my son was chosen to shoot him in a mercy killing for the security of the country,' said Mrs. Oswald, 'and if this is true, it was a fine thing to do, and my son was a hero' . . . "

These are the ramblings of a distraught, disturbed mother, whose dead son has been accused of the most

horrendous crime in modern memory. It's understandable that she might clutch at any bizarre explanation in the pitiful hope of clearing him.

## *Highly Respected Author*

But McCall's is certainly no scandal sheet. And Jean Stafford is a highly respected author. How could she possibly lend her reputation to the vulgar stunt of making the tragic, tortured words of this woman sound credible?

She didn't. The article she wrote for the magazine's current issue is actually a useful, in-depth study of Mrs. Oswald. In no way does it support that sad lady's "theories." Rather, it contributes, and perhaps importantly, to our knowledge of Harvey Lee Oswald's background.

You would never know it, however, if you read only the McCall's press release. You would have to come away with the impression that there must be something to Mrs. Oswald's theories, if a major magazine considered them important enough to print.

By its very nature, the press release is a carnival gimmick of journalism. The only way a publicity man can hope his handout will get a little space is to make it as sensational as possible.

Unfortunately, this one succeeded. It won't be surprising if many papers reprint the ghastly suggestion that the United States Secret Service was engaged in a conspiracy with Oswald.

And there are enough confused people around who will be willing to accept that as an answer to the terrible question of John Kennedy's death.

## *Defended by Editor*

I talked to McCall's editor, Robert Stein, who defended the sensationalism of the release as "necessary." Then he added: "I must confess, though, I had some doubts about it. I was afraid it might be misinterpreted."

After that, I spoke with Jean Stafford. She's the widow of A. J. Liebling and is herself a best-selling author. Louis Auchincloss has named her as one of the eight leading women novelists of the century.

I read her the release. She let out a ladylike scream. "Where," she demanded, "did you get THAT?"

"McCall's sent it out."

"I might just faint," she said. "How could they do such an awful thing? It sounds as though I agreed with what Mrs. Oswald said."

"You can say," she said, after the faint-feeling apparently passed, "that there's going to be some hell raised about this tomorrow."

Then she added the battle cry that has chilled magazine editors' hearts ever since Ben Franklin put the first copy of the Saturday Evening Post to bed.

"I'm going to call my agent," she told me. *END*