



Some at home, many more abroad, raise skeptical questions

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JFK's Murder: Sowers of Doubt

Almost from the first, the crime of the century seemed hardly a mystery. A bare 90 minutes after John F. Kennedy was shot down in Dallas last Nov. 22, Lee Harvey Oswald was under arrest. Before the night was out, he was formally charged with the assassination. Within two days, he had been tried in the press, convicted in the public mind, and executed by small-time strip-joint impresario Jack Ruby. It was open and shut—or was it?

A nagging chorus of doubts was abroad on both sides of the Atlantic last week, the dissenting opinions of a world not yet wholly convinced that Oswald—and Oswald alone—killed the President. Some of the alternate views were plainly farfetched: it was a plot by the Syndicate, or the CIA, or labor racketeers, or a ring of Dallas cops. Yet such tales are only the most imaginative making the rounds in the absence of a final, authoritative account of the case. Some of the doubts are political, the speculations of those given to a conspiratorial view of events. The far right has been relatively quiet, content to rest its case on Oswald's private "Marxism" and his two-year defection to Russia as ipso facto evidence of a Communist plot. The voice of the left has been lustier. Thrown onto the defensive by Oswald's *politique*, it has applied reverse English to the conspiracy theory: the suspect was really an FBI hireling, a crypto-rightist—if he was involved at all.

But even in the middle, some Americans—and many Europeans—simply find it hard to believe that so great a crime should be so random, so absurd, so devoid of motivation and mystery as it seems in the official view.

It was precisely to settle any doubts

that Lyndon B. Johnson named his extraordinary commission of inquiry with Chief Justice Earl Warren as chairman. But the commission is still taking testimony in private, its verdict still two or three months away. Until that verdict is in, the public case against Oswald remains a collage of statements and misstatements by Dallas authorities in the first chaotic days after the assassination, patched up piecemeal by un-attributed leaks from Washington and amateur sleuthing by newsmen.

Grab Bag: That mixed bag has been a grab bag for the doubters, a source of loopholes and contradictions for anyone with the time and the will to subject the press accounts to a close, selective exegesis. Conspiracy theories are common currency abroad. And an ex-Communist American in Paris, Thomas Buchanan, seems destined for the widest circulation with one of the most fanciful reconstructions of all: Oswald was little more than an errand boy and, finally, the fall guy in a plot involving several Dallas policemen. His account—serialized in the Paris tabloid *L'Express*—has been snapped up by book publishers throughout Europe.

And Oswald is not without defenders in the U.S. His most ardent advocate has been Mark Lane, a New York lawyer who made his name as a controversialist in a lonely, losing campaign for conflict-of-interest legislation as a one-term state assemblyman. He had already argued Oswald's innocence in lengthy "brief" published in the leftist *National Guardian* when the suspect's mother, Marguerite, named him defense counsel to her late son. Since he has carried his cause onto the college lecture circuit; the Warren com-

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mission itself granted him a hearing. And critiques by other skeptics have appeared in several liberal journals, among them The New Republic, The Nation, and Commentary.

Questions: The critiques are a mixed lot, some based entirely on newspaper accounts, others—including Lane's—fleshed out by on-scene inquiries in Dallas. Yet they share an instinct for the soft spots in the case thus far made public. With official sources under orders to button up until the Warren report is in, the doubters have raised some puzzling questions for which only incomplete answers are now available. The key points:

1. *Did all the shots fired at the Kennedy motorcade really come from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, where Oswald worked?*

2. The doubters argue that one, at least, came from a railroad overpass or a grassy knoll dead ahead of the motorcade—not from the Depository to the rear. Several witnesses thought that was the angle of fire, and so did the cop who first broadcast a report of the assassination. Moreover, doctors at first described a wound just below the President's Adam's apple as an entry wound—an impossible shot from the rear. Two newsmen reported seeing a bullet hole in the windshield of the Kennedy limousine. And some press tallies of the number of recovered bullets suggest that four or five shots were fired—not three as officially indicated.

3. Investigators simply dismiss ear-witness accounts of where the shots came from; besides, no known witnesses saw a rifle on the knoll or the overpass, while some reported seeing a gun barrel in the Depository window. They also discount the entry-wound diagnosis as the fleeting impression of doctors before they opened the President's throat in the attempt to save his life. According to subsequent leaks, an autopsy at Bethesda, Md., showed the President had been hit twice from behind—once in the back of the shoulder, once in the back of the head. A third shot hit Texas Gov. John Connally in the back.

Authorities remain convinced that no other shots were fired. By their count, the bullet that hit Connally lodged in his leg. Another fell from Mr. Kennedy's body when he was placed on a stretcher—thus giving rise to reports of a fourth bullet. The third bullet fragmented: one chunk exited through Mr. Kennedy's throat, and another scarred the inner layer of glass in the three-ply middle windshield. There wasn't so much as a bump on the outer layer, said one commission insider—and there was no bullet hole.

4. *Does the time element attribute to Oswald?*



Lane: He defends Oswald

In the first moments, Depository superintendent Roy Truly and a policeman dashed into the building, bounded up to the second floor, and spotted Oswald coolly sipping a Coke in the cafeteria—a bare 30 seconds, by Truly's estimate, after the final shot. Truly himself figures it would have taken a man at least that long to get downstairs from the sixth floor. And the doubters insist the killer would have lost still more time crossing the sixth-floor room—to hide the rifle—and buying the Coke from a cafeteria coin machine. Their conclusion: Oswald would have to have been in two places at once. And further complicating the picture was the entry a cabbie jotted in his log when a man he identified as Oswald boarded later. His notation said 12:30 p.m.; the assassination was at 12:31. The doubters grant that the entry might have been a rough guess. But they feel it nevertheless raises questions since, by official accounts, Oswald first walked seven



Buchanan: He accuses the police

blocks from the Depository, boarded a bus, and alighted before taking the cab—and still reached his rooming house sometime between 12:45 and 1 p.m.

Investigators doubt whether Truly got upstairs quite so quickly as he said he did; their assumption is that the assassin got a head start downstairs in the confusion immediately after the shooting. And one insider quoted the cabbie as saying he customarily logged his fare in fifteen-minute blocks; a 12:30 entry might mean any time up to 12:45.

Could Oswald have fired the shots?

The doubters say not even an expert could have scored three hits with the murder weapon—an Italian army rifle—in the estimated five and a half seconds involved. They quote one published report that no palm prints or fingerprints were found on the rifle. They cite the negative results of paraffin tests on Oswald's cheeks as evidence that he hadn't fired a rifle.

Investigative sources insist that there is a palm print matching Oswald's—plus some clothing particles traceable to the shirt he wore to work that morning. They write off paraffin tests as inconclusive. They insist that the rifle found by Dallas police in the Depository was the one Oswald bought under an assumed name, despite some initial confusion in identifying it. And, so authorities say, ballistics tests show it fired all three shots. Could Oswald have shot so fast? Some experts say yes, others no; investigators simply note that the five-and-a-half-second estimate is only an estimate, anyway. Their unbudging conclusion: Oswald could—and did.

5. *Did Oswald shoot down Dallas patrolman J.D. Tippit?*

The doubters question whether he was the man who gunned down Tippit in the street 3 miles from the assassination scene, principally because one eyewitness description didn't fit Oswald. But investigators claim three witnesses linking Oswald to the killing—plus ballistics and fingerprint evidence on the revolver taken from him.

Was there a conspiracy?

The doubters find portents aplenty that there was, starting with Oswald's easy escape from the Depository and his swift arrest miles away, ending with the scarcely credible security bungle. Some wonder how Oswald slipped out of the building unless someone let him out. Others doubt the official account that Oswald's arrest was ordered because he was the only Depository employee missing in a quick headcount immediately after the assassination. They question

...how did police know where to look for, unless they had been told in advance? And Ruby's act of vengeance stirred the deepest suspicions of all; a Louis Harris poll showed that fully 40 per cent of the U.S. public still believes there was some link between the two.

Tip on a Slip: For Oswald's escape, there is only the alternative theory that he slipped out before police could seal off the building—a process that took four or five minutes by Truly's estimate. There *was* a headcount, but the first police broadcasts describing the suspect were based on a tip from a bystander who had seen a man who looked like Oswald leave the building. By the time police were ready to name Oswald on the air, he had already been arrested. And Ruby? Beyond the word of a mixed lot of witnesses who claimed to have seen him with Oswald, authorities say there is no solid evidence of any connection.

Yet the virtually impossible problem of proving a negative is likely to leave the case forever open to doubt by those who favor the conspiratorial view. "Hell," said one Justice Department lawyer, "I can't prove that I didn't conspire with Oswald to kill the President." In the end, all he and his colleagues can do is raise the corollary question of just how—let alone why—all the government agencies involved would enter a leak-proof effort to frame Oswald if he was innocent or to shield his fellow plotters if he was part of a conspiracy.

One favored answer among the doubters is that Oswald was on the payroll of the FBI, the CIA, or some other agency and that authorities wanted the case closed quickly to hide his involvement. Both the FBI and CIA have denied employing Oswald. Yet if the doubts are at last to be laid to rest, the Warren commission will have to deal convincingly with that question and a related one: why Oswald wasn't kept under surveillance during the Presidential visit as a known leftist and a sometime defector. FBI officials dismiss that question as "Monday morning quarterbacking"; the doubters go on doubting.

Homework: Some, indeed, have already written off the Warren commission on the mistaken ground that it is limited inquiry to evidence already collected and digested by the FBI. The commission actually is going far beyond: it has summoned 40 key witnesses thus far to Washington, and dispatched a crew of its own staff lawyers to Dallas to take statements from perhaps 150 others. "Our own investigation," says one member, "has been much more exhaustive than anything done by the FBI."

The commissioners are painfully aware of the doubters; some have attempted to offer rebuttals. But a

...was rejected three months ago, and the commission is under Presidential orders not to discuss the case until its report is in. Meantime, the commission has taken pains not only to collect its own firsthand evidence but to submit it to skeptical review even before the report is written. On its invitation, the American Bar Association has dispatched a rotating series of lawyers to look out for Oswald's interests. And, though its proceedings have been closed to public view, the commission plans eventually to publish the testimony it has taken.

"We've had one objective," a commission staffer says: "the truth." But until its account of the truth is published, the doubters—and theorizers—at home and abroad have the field to themselves.