

THE SILENCE OF OSWALD

Plyboy - Nov '63



article **BY JOHN CLELLON HOLMES** two years after the tragedy, the obfuscating fog of emotion has lifted sufficiently for an objective probing of the forces that motivated the assassin

THE PUBLICATION of the Warren Report on the assassination of President Kennedy seems to have answered all important questions of fact about Lee Harvey Oswald in the minds of everyone but chronic skeptics and conspiracy enthusiasts. Indeed, the case against Oswald has been at least 70 percent conclusive since January 1964, and yet the rumors, theories, dark allegations and nagging doubts have mounted steadily in the face of it. Why have so many people expended so much tortuous logic over so few inconsequential holes in that case—holes most of which have now been effectively plugged? Why do these disbelievers continue to disbelieve even after they have read the over 800 pages of the Report itself? And, finally, why do most of us still feel that somehow something is missing that would make this tragic event comprehensible?

The reasons may be more simple than the sort of subjective politicking and simplistic psychologizing to which we are all prone in moments of crisis. For an unbroken chain of facts is incomprehensible unless the man they indict is comprehensible too, and without an overriding motive, all evidence remains circumstantial. And now that the Report has been published, we are forced to conclude that few of the facts therein do much to answer the blunt questions: Given Oswald, why Kennedy? What was the reason for this absurd act?

Probably no one can ever answer these questions for certain, and yet if we accept the conclusions of the Report, that Oswald was guilty and he acted alone (and I see no way to avoid doing so), we are compelled to look more deeply into the life and character of Lee Harvey Oswald in the hope of discovering the psychic conditions that produced his appalling crime. Certainly I cannot have been alone in plodding through the entire Report for the sole purpose of understanding Oswald, and thus ridding myself of what threatened to become a plaguing obsession.

Two kinds of motivation have been ascribed to Oswald—politics and/or madness—and yet the persistent speculation, echoed even in the Report itself, indicates how unsatisfactory these explanations are, to reasonable and unreasonable men alike. On the one hand, the political overtones of the assassination (a left-winger killing a liberal President) are so confused and

contradictory that they supply no really conclusive reason for the crime; and on the other, Oswald under arrest never exhibited (as did Jack Ruby) the self-aggravation, disassociation and rapid alternation of mood that characterize a seriously demented man. He was a psychopath all right—that was clear—but what kind of psychopath? What aggravated his condition beyond bearing? And, above all, what was the specific need in this peculiar man that demanded this particular expression?

A "deep" reading of the Report gave me, at least, a hint of an answer to these questions, for such a reading gradually makes clear that Oswald's action may have been nothing less than his decisive move beyond politics, and out of mere neurosis, into that frightening existential realm from which people sometimes violently gesture back at the reality they feel has excluded them. (Camus' novel, *The Stranger*, which is an account of an utterly gratuitous murder, is a chilling examination of just such a feeling of exclusion.) That people do act for reasons of this sort is evidenced every day in newspaper stories of cases of "meaningless" violence on the part of alienated, socially disoriented individuals; and perhaps it is because the victim, in this case, was a President, and the assassin a political dissenter, that we have failed to glimpse what has been under our noses all along.

Consider Oswald's human situation. His life was as unremittingly bleak, loveless and thwarting as any described in a Dostoevskyan novel. Growing up in a society that provided an unskilled but reasonably intelligent man almost nothing meaningful on which to expend his idealism, his personal environment continually sabotaged his efforts to discover his own value as a human being. The sobering fact is that there are possibly millions of people in the U.S. who are indistinguishable from Oswald, except for the crime he committed. Rootless, traditionless, fatherless, unloved by his "self-involved" mother, emotionally displaced by their peripatetic life together, moving restlessly from flat to flat, city to city, always crushingly alone, his hours occupied by TV and chance books, friendless and rejected, and so withdrawing more and more from any renewing contact with others, Oswald was that typical figure of the modern world: the anonymous, urban mass man, who most always has the same blank, half-scornful, sullen expression on his face. Oswald's photos, as an example, are all alarmingly alike, and he always looks the same: cautious, irritable, hungry, masked. To him, the world was as impersonal as the camera, and he turned the same face to both.

He appears to have embraced Marxism because, in the U.S. of the 1950s, it was the most unpopular, rebellious, and

socially outrageous creed he could espouse. The society which gave him no place, and did not deign to notice him even as a dissident, had to be spurned in its turn: "I reject the world that has rejected me," as Jean Genet has put it. Nevertheless, Oswald exhibited the neurotic's standard ambivalence toward authority: To escape from one (his mother), he embraced another (the Marines); to defy the U.S., he defended the U.S.S.R. But he was happy nowhere; the psychic heat in him intensified, demanding ceaseless changes of mind to accommodate it, and his few short years were marked by a bewildering number of conflicting political and emotional attitudes. There are those hundreds of dreary "official" letters to the Soviet authorities, the State Department, the Navy Department, the FBI and almost everyone else, the sole reason for which was to define and get on the record his chameleonlike changes of status. Like many of us in this bureaucratized world, he searched for himself in his dossier.

Everything disappointed him; nothing gave him a feeling of his own distinct being; he tried over and over again to find a situation in which he could experience himself as alive, productive, a person of consequence; and one of the most interesting clues to his personality lies in the odd fact of his always writing about his actions (in his *Historic Diary*) in the present tense. The entry recording his suicide attempt in Russia is a telling example (the spelling and punctuation are Oswald's): "I am shocked!! My dreams! . . . I have waited for 2 year to be accepted. My fondes dreams are shattered because of a petty offial . . . I decide to end it. Soak rist in cold water to numb the pain, Than slash my leftwrist. Than plag wrist into bathtium of hot water . . . Somewhere, a violin plays, as I wacth my life whirl away. I think to myself 'How easy to Die' and, 'A Sweet Death, (to violins).'"

This is an astonishing image of a man observing himself as if he were not himself, at once self-dramatic and objective, pathetic and theatrical, but, above all, cold. The very precision of his account of the preparations, the alert recording of his sensory perceptions, and particularly the ironic comment at the end, form a picture of a man cruelly isolated in himself, to whom lonely communion with his own thoughts and the sort of false, reportorial objectivity that results are the normal way he experiences his consciousness. Such a man often becomes a melancholic, or an artist, or a killer.

Oswald's inherent dissent soon overran his political convictions. Pinning his hopes on Russia, he was relieved for a time; losing those hopes in disappointment, he returned to the U.S., only to feel the pressure of exclusion rising in him once again. He vacillated between Cuba and Russia; he made abortive at-

tempts to find a place for himself in various radical movements. Everywhere he was blocked, rejected; ignored. His inability to arrange an escape to Havana seems to have left him, at the last, utterly bereft, utterly placeless, finally outside the conflicting political solutions to his discontent. It thrust him back upon himself, reduced him to having to live with the facts of his social impotence and his personal inadequacy, without even the illusion that he was enduring this pain in the name of something outside himself. As a result, the hammer on the rifle of his already alienated nature was cracked.

His wife never appears to have understood the sort of man he was. She comes through the Report as shallow, adaptable, materialistic and self-centered; a simple, affectionate creature, rather like *The Stranger's* mistress, with little or no understanding of the existential attraction of underground politics to the young, disaffected American, or even of the "complex fate" of Oswald's relentlessly spiriting life. She chides him for his failures, she complains about his ideas; she is easily accepted into the Dallas Russian colony, while he is not; in his country, she finds what he has never found—friends. Oswald's male pride is constantly abused by their acquaintances, by his job losses, by their poverty, his family, and ultimately by Marina herself in the most unforgivable way: She ridicules his sexual performance. He beats her up; he is puritanical in specifically sexual ways (he flies into a fury because the zipper on her skirt is not properly fastened in front of others); he doesn't want her to smoke, or drink, or use cosmetics. He discovers her letter to a former beau in Russia, lamenting that she hadn't married him. The pattern of exclusion and failure becomes more and more personal and interiorized; it reaches that pitch of psychological pressure where a man acts decisively to overcome everything, or goes under and loses his image of himself. And no matter how extravagant or idiotic that image may be, a man must have a self-image or go mad. Viewed in this light, Oswald's crime may have been a last desperate attempt to become part of reality again, to force his way back into the reality that had ignored him, so that he could experience himself as acting, as living, as committed. "Men also secrete the inhuman," Camus has written. "Sometimes, in [our] moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures and their senseless pantomime make everything about them seem stupid." And when we are possessed by such a feeling, we have lost that sense of immediate contact with the world that is the strongest check on the violent whims that sometimes stir in all of us.

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For there comes a moment when we realize that we can break through the invisible and intangible wall that separates us from the person standing right next to us; when we realize that we have been drifting along, as if under water, in the terror and *silence* of isolation; when we see things with the "hopeless lucidity" that Sartre has described somewhere, and realize that only an unwarranted act, an abrupt breaking through the wall, will restore us to reality, and obliterate that silence that imprisons us; when we realize that *they* are not mechanical dolls, automata moving through a dream from which only *we* are excluded, but human—because they will bleed, hurt, die and (perhaps most important of all) turn toward us at the last their shocked faces, across which no hint of our existence has ever glimmered before, startled now by the abrupt recognition of our presence among them. When Marina joined *them*, when she crossed over to the other side of the wall, refusing even to talk to Oswald that last night, refusing even to consider moving into Dallas with him, she (in one sense) put the cartridge in the chamber of his life, and President Kennedy was doomed.

Still, it is possible that Oswald was not absolutely committed to his act. He may have taken the rifle to work that day merely to experience the strange and lonesome thrill of being able to hold someone's life in his hands for a single giddy moment. After all, this is why people peer through binoculars in big cities—to initiate an intimacy that is not threatening because it is an illusion. This is why people expose themselves on subway platforms, without actually planning to assault the observer, and, in some cases, hoping not even to be noticed by him. This is why people carry weapons they could never bring themselves to use. It is the urge of the outsider, the isolated, to feign a breakthrough into the unknown possibilities of ongoing reality, and it is at least conceivable that Oswald intended to do nothing but *view* Kennedy through the telescopic sight of his rifle, and feel for a moment the omnipotence and self-importance that his whole life (and now his wife as well) had denied him.

Once having reached this point, however, circumstances would have pushed him over. For circumstances, the accidents of as-yet-unrealized time, often create the pressure of the finger on the trigger, and psychologists believe that people always act by some logic of self-interest at their peril. What might have happened, for instance, if the Negro youth who had eaten his lunch at Oswald's window a scant half hour before had remained there instead of going

down to a lower floor to watch the motorcade with his friends? What would have happened had someone asked Oswald to watch the motorcade with *him*? No one can say, and yet one is left with the uneasy feeling that an act of friendship, a recognition, a movement toward human contact, at a hundred different junctures during Oswald's life might have radically altered the course he traveled. So why not at this most crucial of junctures? If, for instance, Marina had discussed their situation with him that last night, and perhaps allowed that discussion to lead to some sort of minimal reconciliation in their bed, would Oswald have needed this ultimate, severing act to relieve himself of the unendurable *silence* that enclosed him? No one can ever say.

Certainly, his psychopathy was real, constantly expanding and dangerous. He had tried to kill General Walker some months earlier, after planning the attempt for many weeks, only to miss a far easier shot than the apparently impulsive one that hit the President—a clear indication to me that the first was only another muddled political gesture, whereas the second was something deeper and more mysterious. By November 1963, his need had grown to proportions that no single annealing act on the part of any one person, much less the environment, could have dissipated. And yet there are probably thousands of people who are daily caught in psychic binds not unlike his—so many cocked rifles walking anonymously through the streets—and little or nothing in our society, or in our mostly naïve conceptions of our responsibility to each other's lonely struggle to keep from drowning in it, offers any sure way by which these cocked rifles can be disarmed. At least not until they have gone off, and it is too late.

Oswald's relation to reality is succinctly described by the "we" in Camus' "A man is talking on the telephone. We cannot hear him behind the glass partition, but we can see his senseless mimicry. We wonder why he is alive?" It was this glass partition that separated Oswald from the rest of us, and made him feel that he was only a "thing" in our eyes, a piece of meaningless, uncared-for flotsam. But a man cannot exist this way, at least not a man who is the intelligent, articulate and impatient neurotic that Oswald seems to have been. Such a man often feels that only two alternatives are open to him: to rashly insist on being his idealized image of himself, or to slavishly become the nonentity the world tells him over and over again that he is.

The fact remains that in the urbanized and impersonal America of his day, Oswald's resources were never used, his affections were never aroused, his concern for the future was never harnessed, and yet, on the evidence, he seems to

have been reasonably brave, potentially decisive, mostly hard-working and certainly untiring in his efforts to break out of the dead end of his existence. At least all these qualities were present in him, in embryo, and only soured and became destructive when he could find no place to utilize them creatively.

One indication of the blistered wasteland of his human and social hopes lies in this passage, which he wrote after his disappointment with Russia: "I wonder what would happen if somebody was to stand up and say he was utterly opposed not only to the governments, but to the people, to the entire land and complete foundations of his socially." We need no longer wonder, for he has given us one answer to the question, and perhaps it was this very "wondering" of his that led him (still uncommitted to the act itself) to that window. In any case, his words stand as a twisted rebuke to a society that can seem to recognize only its madmen or its heroes, but steadfastly ignores the countless millions of anonymous people yearning to feel some responsibility, some faith, some ultimate stake in the world around them.

In a larger sense, the two polar aspects of the contemporary American character collided that day in Dallas—a consideration which, in going beyond politics, goes far to explain why it had to be Kennedy. For John Kennedy was everything that Lee Oswald was not. He existed directly in the vivid center of reality, he was potent in every way, his life and personality were one continuous action and interaction; he was neither dualistic, separated nor helpless; he had never been prevented from experiencing himself as alive and consequential. Oswald struck back at everything he was *not*, but in a sense he was performing a Kennedylike act (as far as he could imagine one), and was attempting to *become* the sort of man he killed by the very act of killing. And so all that was most starved, thwarted

and hopeless in our national life took its pathetic and sullen revenge on all that was most vital, potent and attractive.

The horror of Oswald's loneliness, the extremity of his hunger, the appalling facelessness and spirit-withering *silence* of his whole life exploded in a bitter and anguished threat: Either he would be admitted onto life's stage or he would pull that stage down in total ruin; he would be recognized as having that sense of uniqueness that a human being *has* to have if he is to outwit the despair that leads to madness, or he would turn his very powerlessness into a source of power. Those who are imprisoned in the silence of reality always use a gun (or, if they are more fortunate, a pen) to speak for them, and perhaps the prince and the pauper in the human spirit are doomed to meet face to face, no matter what. But certainly the job of a sane and mature society is to see that this meeting does not take place through the sights of a high-powered rifle.

In one sense, we are poorer for the loss of them *both*. Though we lost Oswald years before we lost Kennedy, how many losses of *any* human potential can our besieged society afford? The fact is that a man will affirm his humanity at all costs, even if it means denying the humanity of others, and the whole ghastly nightmare of modern history has been endured for nothing if we have not understood that paradox at last. Oswald's blind insistence that he *was* a man, no matter what the sum of his life might indicate, had to be made in terms that the world could comprehend and, denied every other exit from that smothering silence, he resorted to the only language that our time seems to offer to the voiceless: He took a gun and aimed it at the center of the life from which he felt orphaned, and so broke into the stream of reality at last, by arresting it.

For a moment, he must have felt the exhilaration, the keenness to sensory stimuli and the virile power of choice that characterize a man functioning at the top of himself as a human being. Certainly his sinister calm before the Dallas police, his refusal to be trapped by their web of logic and his perfectly blank-faced denials of any complicity in the assassination suggest a man whose darker conflicts are at least temporarily at rest, a man at ominous peace with his divided life.

But if all this is true, it is too harsh a comment on our world, and its attritions, to be merely a psychological footnote to a political tragedy. Instead, it should remind us that history is, at the last, only the exterior appearance of far more important inner events—such as those that Lee Harvey Oswald suffered until he could suffer no more, and so struck back out of his wound.