



Scholar offers new look at inner workings of the Warren Commission 35 years later

"If people knew what happened on the commission, they might be more at peace with the outcome," says Max Holland

By Kristen Lans

One was a liberal Republican, the other an arch-conservative Democrat.

It was 1963, and if Chief Justice Earl Warren said "up," Sen. Richard Russell of Georgia would say "down." That's the way things usually went between the two key members of the Warren Commission, the federal entity charged with investigating the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

But they did agree on one thing: The shooting was the act of lone gunman Lee Harvey Oswald, and he was not part of a larger conspiracy.

Thirty-five years after the Nov. 22 assassination, an independent scholar at Brown is writing a book that promises to shed new light on that often criticized finding by examining the personalities of the men who made up that seven-member panel.

It is one story that has gone untold even as scholars, writers and film makers scrambled to examine every angle of the assassination in the years that followed, according to Max Holland, a fellow at the [John Nicholas Brown Center for the Study of American Civilization](#). By understanding the inner workings of the federal commission, people can truly appreciate its decision, he said.

"I think it is the missing piece of the puzzle," said Holland. "If people knew what happened on the commission, they might be more at peace with the outcome."

Holland has been at Brown since July doing research for his book. Started three years ago for Houghton Mifflin publishers, it is tentatively titled "A Need to Know: Inside the Warren Commission," and is scheduled for publication at the end of 1999.

He began thinking about the book soon after watching Oliver Stone's movie "J.F.K." Like most Americans, Holland said, he felt uneasy about the plot of a conspiracy played out on screen.

The film presented the Warren Commission as a blundering panel that made stupid mistakes in its investigation. At the time of the movie's release, Holland had been working as a reporter in the nation's capital for more than a and considered it highly implausible that the federal government could be organized enough to pull off a conspiracy.

In the wake of the movie, many of the staff who had worked for the Warren Commission were outraged and willing to talk to him, said Holland. They had undertaken an arduous task with the belief that it was a public responsibility, and felt abused by the continuing controversy.

Holland also interviewed the only surviving commissioner, former President Gerald Ford, and former members of the Dallas Police Department, local FBI, local Secret Service and U.S. Attorney's Office. He researched the personal papers kept by the commissioners, and records at the Gerald Ford Library, Lyndon B. Johnson Library and, most recently, the John F. Kennedy Library.

http://www.brown.edu/Administration/George_Street_Journal/vol23/23GSJ12a.html 5/18/01

The story that Holland tells begins with two men who could agree on nothing.

It had taken President Lyndon Johnson 45 minutes to cajole Russell into serving with Earl Warren. Once during the investigation Russell had his secretary type out a letter of resignation to Johnson, but it was never delivered, said Holland.

Political and philosophical tensions between the two ran so deep that Russell refused to acknowledge the commission's rightful name, instead calling it the President's Commission, said Holland.

They were at odds throughout the 10-month process, disagreeing on everything from hiring staff to interviewing witnesses, nearly 100 which whom be brought before the commission, said Holland.

In taking testimony from Oswald's widow, Warren barred any adversarial cross-examination. The situation frustrated Russell enough to fly to Dallas and interview Marina Oswald himself toward the end of the investigation. He did not find out anything more than anyone else had, said Holland.

In the end, after debate over its wording, the commission unanimously agreed on the report. It found "on the basis of the evidence before the commission" that Oswald acted alone. The report offered a list of possible motives, including things like Oswald's "deep-rooted resentment to all authority," "urge to find a place in history" and "capacity for violence."

The report's release made a huge splash in newspapers; many published special sections on the report, said Holland. But misunderstanding about the commission's work began soon after when the man who headed it, Warren, frequently refused to answer any questions about it, he said.

"His attitude was 'I tell you this happened and you accept it,'" said Holland, adding, "he acted like it was a Supreme Court decision ... he very rarely discussed it."

Warren did not understand that when you just present a conclusion with the statement "accept it on face value," rumors will continue, said Holland. Compounding the situation were some irregularities that occurred in the initial investigation and autopsy.

Asked whether he believes there was a conspiracy to kill the president, Holland flatly replied "no."

The Warren Commission was the fourth investigation into Kennedy's assassination, he said. It followed investigations conducted by the Dallas Police Department, FBI and Secret Service, and the commission "did by any definition a reasonable job," he said.

However, without the permanency of a trial - a possibility erased when Jack Ruby shot and killed Oswald - doubt may always linger, Holland said. Russell recognized that three and a half decades ago.

When the report was completed, Russell was asked if he was glad that it was over, said Holland. "Do you really think it is over? They'll be debating this for 100 years," Russell replied.

It's already been 35.