

THE BITTER HARVEST: LYNDON B. JOHNSON AND THE ASSASSINATION OF JOHN F. KENNEDY

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ON NOVEMBER 22, 1963, JOHN F. KENNEDY, the thirty-fifth President of the United States, was shot and killed in Dallas, Texas. His Vice President, Lyndon B. Johnson, immediately assumed the office of the presidency. Less than one year later, following a landslide victory over Senator Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election, Johnson became President in his own right. Within four years, however, Johnson would be driven from the White House, one of the most hated, abused and vilified Presidents in modern history. Historians of the Johnson presidency have emphasized weaknesses in Johnson's style and personality, his problems with the media, the failure of the Great Society to end poverty and racism, the New Left, and bitter division over the war in Vietnam to explain Johnson's fall from grace with the American people. Little consideration has been given, however, to the impact of Kennedy's assassination on Johnson and his administration. While one must exercise caution in attempting to evaluate the impact of Kennedy's violent death, it is not fanciful to suggest that the legacy of the assassination was one of the most persistent and perplexing forces which emasculated the Johnson presidency and which contributed greatly to his ultimate fall from power.

One week after the assassination, on November 29, 1963, President Johnson issued Executive Order 11130, creating the Warren Commission to investigate President Kennedy's death. The President's decision to create the Warren Commission was necessitated by two immediate developments in the wake of the assassination. First, in spite of J. Edgar Hoover's assurance that the FBI would conduct a thorough investigation, it was apparent that the State of Texas and a number of congressional committees would also launch investigations of what was already widely hailed as the crime of the century. After discussions with Bobby Kennedy, Nicholas Katzenbach, Archibald Cox, Eugene Rostow, Dean Rusk and Joseph Alsop, Johnson decided that a blue ribbon panel, made up of highly distinguished Americans, would have to be created to guarantee that the investigation would be conducted in a systematic, co-ordinated and above all dignified manner.¹

A second development which forced Johnson's decision to create the Warren Commission was the widespread fear that President Kennedy had been the victim of either a domestic or foreign conspiracy. Johnson realized that his credibility, particularly since Kennedy had been killed in his home state of Texas, would be undermined unless rumors about a possible conspiracy were dispelled. Liz Carpenter, Lady Bird Johnson's personal aide, was immediately concerned about the implications of the assassination having taken place in Dallas. She told Lady Bird: "It's a terrible thing to say, but the salvation of Texas is that the Governor was hit." Lady Bird, also worried about her husband's acceptance, responded, "Don't think I haven't thought of that. I only wish it could have been me."² Johnson also worried that the Kennedy assassination might irreparably damage the image of the United States as the champion of peace and justice throughout the world. While the President's aides put out round-the-clock bulletins to emphasize the orderly transition of power, it was immediately apparent that the assassination would have international repercussions.³ In Latin America concerns were raised about the future of the Alliance for Progress, in Africa about the civil rights of black people, and in Europe about the future of Soviet-American relations. The United States Information Agency warned, "The most damaging aspect of world reaction is the image of the United States as a nation of laws and morality There has been wild speculation in both the Free World and the Communist world about elaborate plots. The confusion of events was made to order for the Communist propagandists. The alleged plots are seen everywhere as racist and rightist."⁴

The murder of Kennedy's accused assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, two days after the President's death, increased speculation, at home and abroad, that Kennedy had been killed by conspiratorial forces. As rumors began to circulate that foreign powers, particularly Cuba and the Soviet Union, might be involved in Kennedy's death, Johnson became alarmed that the speculations might precipitate a world conflict of catastrophic proportions. When Johnson asked a reluctant Earl Warren, the Chief

Justice of the Supreme Court, to lead the investigation of the assassination, he expressed the fear that rumors of Castro or Khrushchev might have been involved in the President's death could catapult the United States into a nuclear war which might leave forty million Americans dead.⁵ While some Americans did call for an immediate invasion of Cuba and demanded the death of Castro, the massive panic and hysteria which Johnson feared failed to materialize.⁶ If the threat of war passed quickly, the fear that America's enemies, both real and imagined, would try to exploit the uncertainty surrounding the assassination to undermine vital interests of the United States did not.

In an atmosphere of crisis, in both domestic and foreign affairs, the Warren Commission held its first meeting on December 15, 1963. Nearly ten months later, on September 24, 1964, Earl Warren personally delivered the Commission's final report to President Johnson. The report, which concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald had indeed killed the President and that there was no evidence of a conspiracy in the assassination, was released to the public on September 28. On November 30, 1964, the twenty-six volumes of hearings conducted by the Warren Commission were also made available to the public. Allen Dulles, who had served on the Commission, wrote to President Johnson that the Commission's work had been arduous but concluded that "if the commission's work by its search for the facts, will contribute to quiet misguided rumors and build more security for the great Office of the President in the future, the time will have been well spent." Unfortunately for President Johnson, the report would neither quiet the "misguided rumors" nor "build more security" for his office. A month after the Warren Commission issued its final report, a Harris poll indicated that the overwhelming majority of the American people accepted the finding that Oswald had murdered the President, but more than forty percent still believed, or were undecided, about whether Oswald had acted alone.⁷

Lingering suspicions about the assassination soon led to the charge that Johnson had pressured the Warren Commission to finish its work prematurely. The motive, the critics charged, was that Johnson wanted the report to be issued before the Democratic Convention to silence the rumors that he might have been involved in the assassination and to prevent a still grieving nation from turning to Robert Kennedy for the nomination. Johnson was anxious for the

Commission to finish its work and he was fearful, as long as the assassination remained an emotional issue, that Bobby Kennedy might derail his drive for the nomination. The evidence is also clear that the Commission did discuss the advisability of completing its report before the election and did feel the pressure to complete its work as soon as possible. The pressure came, however, not from the President, but from the general public's demand to know the results of the Commission's investigation.

During the ten month investigation the most frequent charge was not that the Commission might "rush to judgment," but rather than it was taking too long to complete the investigation. An impatient press, and the general public, questioned the President again and again about when the report finally would be concluded. At least one member of the Commission, John J. McCloy, tried, through CIA Director John McCone, to persuade Johnson to pressure Warren to speed up the work of the Commission. After a dinner meeting with McCloy, McCone advised Johnson, "His specific recommendation was that you call Chief Justice Warren urging some action and he asked that I communicate this suggestion to you."⁸ Warren, who insisted that the Commission had followed every lead to its logical conclusion, was exasperated that the Commission's work had taken so long. He later recalled "... really that was the kind of murder case that would be tried at best in two or three days, it was that simple."⁹

President Johnson not only made no effort to speed up the Warren Commission investigation, he did everything possible to avoid even the inference that he was trying to influence the outcome of the Commission's deliberations. He placed no monetary restrictions on the Commission, established no deadlines, and scrupulously avoided contact with members of the investigatory team. Johnson was determined, however, to control the timing of any publication of the report when the Commission finished its work.¹⁰

In July, 1964, McGeorge Bundy, representing the White House, met with J. Lee Rankin, the Chief Counsel for the Warren Commission, and agreed to have the Commission's report issued between the dates of August 7 and August 9, well in advance of the Democratic Convention, which was to begin on August 24 in Atlantic City. Bundy reported to the President, "I insisted strongly this morning that a later date would be very unsatisfactory in that it would connect the Report to the Democratic

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convention in a way that would be bad for President Kennedy's memory, bad for the report, bad for the administration, and confusing to the country."¹¹ Although Johnson had announced in late July that no member of the cabinet would be considered for the Vice-Presidential nomination, the President and his staff still worried that the convention, if swayed by the emotions linked to the assassination, might still nominate Bobby for the vice-presidency, or conceivably, for the presidency itself. To clear his name and to prevent the convention from turning to Bobby as a possible candidate, Johnson wanted the report issued before the convention. When it became apparent that the report would not be finished by the first week in August, Bundy suggested that consideration be given to delaying the publication of the Report until after the convention had met. Bundy's motives were partly political, since he worried, along with Johnson, that the report might have a dramatic impact on the convention, but he also expressed concern that any effort to rush the writing of the final report would result in slipshod work which might undermine the credibility of the Commission's final conclusions.¹²

Johnson could control the timing of the publication of the report, but he was disappointed in his hope that the Warren Commission would restore complete faith in America's institutions and would undermine the widespread belief in conspiracy theories. The Warren Report received a mixed reaction in the world press. In Britain, Germany and Scandinavia the press generally supported the findings of the Commission. Reactions in other parts of the world were, however, more guarded and ranged from moderate skepticism to outright disbelief.¹³ Domestically, for more than a year following the publication of the Warren Commission report, the issue of the assassination gradually faded into the background while the Johnson administration enjoyed its greatest triumphs. By 1966, however, controversy concerning the Kennedy assassination hit the nation like a storm as a veritable flood of books, most of which were highly critical of the Warren Commission, rolled off the nation's presses.¹⁴

The books varied widely in both quality and emphasis, but two major themes emerged from the new studies of the assassination. First, the books questioned the Warren Commission's conclusion that the bullets which killed President Kennedy and wounded Governor John Connally were fired by a lone assassin stationed in the Texas School Book

Depository Building. Second, many of the books concluded that the Warren Commission did not conduct a thorough, and unbiased, investigation of the assassination. Edward Epstein's book, *Inquest*, was particularly devastating to the Commission's credibility. Unlike other books on the assassination, Epstein's study was based upon documents and working papers of the Warren Commission which had not yet been made available to the general public. Epstein argued that the Commission had been hampered by an impossible deadline, lacked an adequate investigative staff, ignored witnesses, sifted testimony to serve its purposes, omitted contradictory evidence and inconsistent details and most important had been less dedicated to finding the truth than it had been in reaching a quick verdict to pacify an incredulous public.¹⁵

Mark Lane, in his best-selling book, *Rush to Judgment*, documented in even greater detail the charge that the Commission's work had been seriously flawed. The flamboyant lawyer, who had "volunteered" to serve as Oswald's attorney during the Warren Commission's investigation, had a rare talent for attracting publicity and media attention. Even though Lane had uncovered no new evidence about the assassination, his thesis that the Commission had "rushed" to judgment was especially damaging to President Johnson. In interviews and frequent television appearances Lane not only challenged the Warren Commission, but he also attacked the President. After watching Lane on a television talk show in Los Angeles, R.D. Fowler wrote Johnson that Lane's name was on everyone's lips and that a "rumbling volcano of trouble" was brewing. Fowler reported that during the interview Lane had said that Jackie Kennedy had told Gore Vidal that on the trip back to Washington from Dallas after the assassination, she had found Johnson in the rear compartment of Air Force One "... noticeably laughing over the coffin that held President Kennedy's mutilated body." Fowler insisted that President Johnson must defend himself but Paul Poppel, Assistant to the President, responded for Johnson that "... rumors such as you mention are so far beneath the contempt that I would not dignify them with a denial or public notice."¹⁶

While Lane had been content to merely engage in character assassination, other books on the murder charged that the President's death had been masterminded by none other than Lyndon Johnson. Early in 1967 Don Price, Dean of Harvard's John

Fitzgerald Kennedy School of Government, warned Presidential Assistant Joseph Califano that Joachim Joesten, who in 1964 had published *Oswald, Assassin or Fall Guy?* was planning a book directly accusing Johnson of Kennedy's murder. Joesten informed Price that Johnson had lured Kennedy to Texas and had plotted the President's death because he was fearful that Kennedy would drop him from the Democratic Party's ticket in the 1964 elections. Johnson's fears, Joesten alleged, were directly related to the investigation of Bobby Baker which was underway at the time of the assassination. Since he realized that the investigation would involve him in scandal and corruption Johnson decided, according to Joesten, to save his job by killing the President. Since Joesten also charged that Bobby Baker, H.L. Hunt, Robert McNamara, Richard Helms, James Rowley, Jesse E. Curry, Henry Wade, Earle Cabel, Kenneth O'Donnell and J. Edgar Hoover were also involved in the plot, or the cover-up that followed, his charges could hardly be taken seriously. Still, in 1967, Joesten published his charges in *The Dark Side of LBJ*. Joesten reiterated the thesis that Johnson, the Secret Service, the CIA and a host of others, had all conspired in the death of the President. Joesten concluded that since Johnson had not bothered to answer his charges, the President was obviously guilty and should, after taking the full responsibility for the assassination, commit suicide.¹⁷

Joesten's scurrilous attacks, which found a very limited audience could be dismissed, but the mounting attacks on the Warren Commission could not. In late 1966 two of Johnson's closest political allies, Senator Richard Russell, who had served on the Warren Commission, and Governor John Connally, who had been wounded while riding with Kennedy in Dallas, poured more fuel on the fire when they admitted in public that they had never been satisfied with the Warren Commission's conclusions. Russell, although he had attended few of the Warren Commission's meetings, concluded that there might have been a conspiracy in the assassination. Connally, after viewing the Abraham Zapruder film of the assassination, admitted in an interview with *Life Magazine* that he did not believe he had been wounded by the same bullet which struck President Kennedy in the back of the neck.¹⁸

Criticisms of the Warren Commission, coupled with demands for a new investigation, began to have a dramatic impact on public opinion. According to public opinion polls thirty-one percent of the

population believed in a conspiracy in mid-1966; by the middle of 1967, nearly two-thirds believed that there had been a conspiracy in the assassination and seventy percent of those interviewed believed that the Warren Commission had not told the whole truth.¹⁹ In February, 1967, Jim Garrison, the District Attorney in New Orleans, announced that he had solved the Kennedy murder case. Garrison accused Clay Shaw, the Director of the New Orleans Trade Mart, David Ferrie, and Lee Harvey Oswald with having conspired to murder the President. Before Garrison could conclude his inquiry, and begin the trial of the alleged conspirators, David Ferrie died, apparently of natural causes. As garish headlines filled the newspapers, Garrison pushed ahead with the trial of Clay Shaw. Shaw was eventually acquitted, but not before the trial had been turned into a three ring circus. By the end of the trial, obviously lacking hard evidence and reliable witnesses, Garrison lashed out at Johnson and the CIA.

Garrison insisted that the CIA knew something about the assassination and accused Johnson, the major beneficiary of the assassination, of having perpetrated the greatest fraud in the history of mankind on the American people.²⁰ Johnson watched the Garrison investigation, and the attacks on the Warren Commission, with increasing alarm. Hugh Ayesworth, a Dallas reporter, solemnly warned George Christian, the President's Press Secretary, that Garrison was "... hell-bent on involving several high officials." He concluded, ominously, "In his devious scheme he can—and probably will—do untold damage to the nation's image."²¹

Johnson could take some solace from a report from Fred Panzer that Garrison's theatrics had, at least temporarily, caused many people to be more skeptical about conspiracy theories relating to the assassination. He still worried, however, as he had in 1963, that the attacks on the Warren Report, and suggestions that he might have been involved in the assassination, would be detrimental to America's image in the world and would undermine his credibility on the home front. In October 1966, Leonard Macks, of the United States Information Agency, reported to the President that the criticisms of the Warren Commission were being given great attention in the capitals of the world. At the same time Jack Valenti, one of Johnson's most trusted aides, warned the President, following a trip to Europe, that the attacks on the Warren Commission

were a "... serious and shameful problem." Valenti recommended that the President appoint a distinguished panel of lawyers, headed by Louis Nizer, to write a defense of the Commission. He assured the President that such a panel would put the "slanderers" to rest and warned, "Unless the Warren Report is validated, and soon, this disbelief will grow and grow—to what ends, no one can accurately predict."²² Presidential advisor John Roche advised Johnson that Jacob Cohen and Richard Whalen were working on a defense of the Warren Commission, and worried that Russell and Connally had "... turned the cat loose among the canaries." Roche, alarmed by the creeping paranoia which was spreading throughout the country, concluded on an alarming note, "You have enough problems with the war in Vietnam and to have the nation indulging in an orgy of sick speculation on events in Dallas could really poison the atmosphere What is at issue far transcends the factual questions about Dallas that have been raised; we are faced with an assault on the credibility of our institutions."²³

Johnson, who worried even more than Roche that the escalating controversy about the assassination might undermine his presidency, refused, at least in public, to criticize the Warren Commission and notified his staff that they should refrain from commenting on the Warren Report.²⁴ The President, who also harbored doubts about the Warren Commission's conclusions, also refused to begin a new investigation of the assassination. Instead Johnson decided to do everything possible to open up to the public all the still classified information relating to the President's death.

On November 23, 1964, nearly three hundred cubic feet of materials collected by the Warren Commission during the investigation were turned over to the National Archives. The materials did not contain, however, the evidence, including the President's brain, used during the autopsy which had been performed on the President's body at Bethesda Naval Hospital. To control the dissemination of the information, and to spare the Kennedys even more pain, the materials had been given to the Kennedy family. As speculation about a possible conspiracy increased, Robert Kennedy authorized the release of the sensitive materials to the National Archives. The formal transfer was not completed until October 31, 1966.²⁵

The expectation that the public would be allowed to view the evidence collected by the Warren Commission was quickly disappointed when the National Archives announced that the evidence

would be sealed for a period of seventy-five years. The seventy-five year rule was not unusual; it was routinely applied to other government documents as well, but again the government was charged with covering up information that was vital to an impartial investigation of Kennedy's death. Critics of the Warren Commission who believed that the autopsy evidence might further discredit the Commission's report were especially insistent that the evidence turned over to the National Archives by the Kennedys be made public. In 1966 the Archives, with the consent of the Kennedy family, did allow the original autopsy pathologists to re-examine the evidence. However, since the pathologists had been involved in the original autopsy, their report, which had reaffirmed the Warren Commission's findings, was given little credence by a confused and desperately suspicious public.²⁶

Johnson, who was frequently accused of blocking a new investigation, worked quietly and patiently behind the scenes to lift the restrictions placed on the materials by the National Archives. On January 18, 1965, McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant to the President, directed the Attorney General, Nicholas Katzenbach, to see if the seventy-five year rule could be modified. Although the autopsy evidence and the working papers of the Warren Commission remained closed, it was decided that agencies which had assisted the Warren Commission in collecting investigatory materials should be reviewed by each agency and made public as soon as possible.²⁷ By the late summer of 1965 the National Archives announced that ninety-six percent of the materials from the Department of Defense, sixty-nine percent of the material from the Department of State, eighty-one percent from the FBI, seventy-six percent from other federal agencies, and fifty-one percent of the materials collected by state and local agencies for the Warren Commission were now available to the public. On August 17, 1966, the Attorney General also asked the National Archives to apply the same standards of public accessibility to the working papers and internal reports of the Warren Commission.²⁸

The gradual release of documents relating to the assassination did not, as Johnson had hoped, end speculation that Kennedy had been gunned down by more than one assassin. The crucial X-rays, photographs and autopsy reports were in the Archives, but could be seen only with the permission of the Kennedy family.²⁹ By the end of Johnson's years in the White House, voluminous documents had been released to the public but sensitive materials collected by the FBI, the CIA and the

Warren Commission itself remained classified. Patiently the White House tried to explain that much of the material remained closed to protect individual rights and to maintain national security, but to no avail. Unable to control the flow of information from the National Archives, Johnson failed to convince critics of the Warren Commission that neither he nor other government agencies were concealing information from the public. In fact the critics were right.

Immediately after Kennedy was killed both the FBI and the CIA moved to exonerate their agencies of any responsibility in the President's death. However, in an effort to control the investigation, the FBI tried to persuade Johnson to rely exclusively on the FBI to investigate the assassination. Johnson trusted the expertise of the Bureau and accepted its conclusion that Oswald had killed the President but he wisely broadened the scope of the investigation by appointing the Warren Commission. Hoover, who seemed as concerned about protecting the image of the FBI as solving the murder case, destroyed evidence in Oswald's file which made it appear that the FBI should have perceived that he was a threat to the President; and most important, tried to conclude the investigation as soon as possible to prevent a systematic review of the FBI's previous contacts with Oswald. Ultimately, Johnson, who was certainly aware of many of Hoover's self-serving maneuvers, had no choice but to rely upon the integrity of the FBI. The President harbored doubts about whether Oswald acted alone but he had only limited evidence to document his suspicions.³⁰

In 1971, in an interview with Walter Cronkite which, at the President's request was not shown on television until 1975, Johnson admitted that he never had been completely satisfied with the Warren Commission's conclusion that Oswald had acted alone. Johnson never explained why he doubted the validity of the Warren Commission's conclusions. He also remained vague about the individuals, or groups, he thought might have had a hand in Kennedy's death. It is also not clear whether Johnson always believed in the possibility of a conspiracy or whether, like other Americans during the decade of the 1960s, his doubts ebbed and flowed with the introduction of new evidence, or the more frequently new interpretations, about Kennedy's assassination. Although Johnson had access to information that was concealed from the public, by especially the CIA, the President's effort to unravel the truth was systematically stonewalled by the

American intelligence community.³¹

From the moment of the assassination Johnson worried that a foreign power might have been involved in the action. Fearful that Kennedy's assassination might be part of a broader plot to eliminate other top leaders in the government, the Secret Service took immediate security precautions to protect Johnson's life. When Air Force One left Dallas on its return flight to Washington, the pilot was ordered to fly in a zig-zag pattern in case enemy fighter planes were lying in wait for the President's plane. American military forces throughout the world were also put on alert in case the assassination was part of a preliminary move to attack the United States or the first step in launching an invasion in another part of the world.³²

On November 23, the day after the assassination, Johnson was informed by CIA Director John McCone that Oswald had had contacts with Soviet officials in Mexico just weeks before the assassination. The defection of Uri Nosenko, in February, 1964, also raised troubling questions about the possibility of Soviet involvement in Kennedy's death. Nosenko, who claimed to have been a KGB agent in the Soviet Union, informed the CIA that he had read the KGB file on Oswald and insisted that there was no evidence that Oswald had been recruited to serve as an agent for the Soviet government. The CIA was divided on whether Nosenko could be trusted. Many people in the agency accepted Nosenko as a bona fide defector but others suspected he was a disinformation agent, planted by the KGB to direct American attention away from the possible involvement of the Soviet Union in Kennedy's assassination. Ultimately, although there was still considerable skepticism within the intelligence community, Johnson was assured by the FBI, the CIA and the State Department that there was no information to document Soviet involvement in the assassination. Johnson remained suspicious of the Soviet Union, but he also doubted whether Soviet officials would have been stupid enough to risk World War III by assassinating an American President. The limited faith he had in Soviet officials was not, however, extended to the Castro government in Cuba, or for that matter the American CIA.³³

When he became President, Johnson was aware that the United States had played a role in the murders of Trujillo and Diem and, in the spring of 1964, told Pierre Salinger that he sometimes thought

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that Kennedy's death was the result of divine retribution for America's past sins.³⁴ His suggestion that Kennedy might have been killed as an act of retribution was not, however, contingent upon the wrath of God. Johnson also believed that Castro, as an act of retaliation against the Kennedys, might have plotted the President's death.

During the Eisenhower administration the CIA became actively involved in plots to assassinate Fidel Castro. Plans to murder him were intensified, with the approval of both the President and the Attorney General, during Kennedy's first years in the White House. By 1963, however, as Kennedy moved toward normalizing relations with the Cuban leader, the CIA was ordered to stop its clandestine plans to assassinate Castro. The CIA disregarded the President's orders and continued to maintain contact with Rolando Cubella, a disenchanted minister without portfolio in the Cuban government, to kill the Cuban leader. On November 22, the day Kennedy was shot in Dallas, Cubella, who had been given the cryptonym AMLASH, was meeting with CIA agents to lay final plans for an assassination attempt against Castro. Contact was broken off with Cubella the day after Kennedy was killed, but the CIA would continue, without the knowledge of President Johnson, to make plans to eliminate Castro until the vendetta was finally terminated in 1965.

On November 24, 1963, President Johnson was briefed by CIA Director John McCone on the agency's covert operations against Castro. McCone, who later testified that he was unaware of the AMLASH operation at the time, did not, however, inform the President of the CIA's continuing plots against Castro. Distrustful of the CIA, which he would later charge with having run a "murder incorporated" in the Caribbean, Johnson placed Hoover in charge of the investigation of Kennedy's murder and ordered the CIA to give its full cooperation to the FBI. Ironically, Hoover also knew about AMLASH but neither he, nor the CIA, informed the President or the Warren Commission of the plot.³⁵

Johnson's fear that Castro might have been involved in the assassination deepened when, on November 25, Gilbert Avarado, a Nicaraguan informant, walked into the American Embassy in Mexico City and reported that on September 18, 1963, he had seen two men in the Cuban Consulate paying money to Lee Harvey Oswald. According to Alvarado, he overheard one of the men say, "I want

to kill the man," and Oswald replied, "You're not alone." Five days later, on November 30, Johnson met with McCone for an hour and a half. Johnson immediately asked about Avarado's allegations, which were still under investigation, and was briefed by McCone on Kennedy's last speeches about Cuba, and more important, about a speech which Castro had delivered on September 7, 1963. In the speech Castro said, "United States leaders should think that if they are aiding terrorists plans to eliminate Cuban leaders, they themselves will not be safe." Castro later insisted that his remarks were not intended as a threat and that he did not know about the AMLASH operation until after Kennedy's death.³⁶

On December 1, and again on December 2, Johnson and McGeorge Bundy met again with McCone to discuss Avarado's charges of a Cuban connection in the assassination. At the same time, on December 2, 1963, Pedro Gutierrez, a credit investigator in Mexico, also wrote to President Johnson indicating that he too had seen Oswald in the Cuban Embassy and had seen money change hands. The drama, and apparent intrigue, continued to build when the CIA reported that a Cubana Airlines flight in Mexico City had been delayed, on the night of November 22, awaiting a mysterious passenger. Although the House Select Committee on Assassinations would later conclude that the investigation of a possible Cuban connection was passive at best, on December 4 the FBI concluded that Avarado was lying and that there was no evidence of foreign involvement in the assassination. Later that month the CIA also delivered a report to the President indicating that it had found no evidence of a conspiracy to kill the President.³⁷

The issue of AMLASH surfaced again in May 1965, when a Cuban exile informed the Immigration and Naturalization Service that he had obtained information about the plan. Although, on January 23, 1964, the CIA assured the FBI that there were no active plots against Castro, plans to use Cubella were still being seriously considered by the CIA until the spring of 1965. The FBI was called in to interview the contact and decided that he did indeed have information about AMLASH. When the FBI notified the CIA that the security of AMLASH had been compromised, the CIA finally cancelled the operation on July 2, 1965. On July 2, 1965 the FBI forwarded a report of the interview to the White House.³⁸

In spite of the report the White House did not

press for an immediate investigation of the CIA's clandestine operations. In 1967, however, the AMLASH fiasco, and rumors that Castro had killed Kennedy to retaliate again reached the White House. In January 1967 underworld figure Johnny Roselli, who was facing deportation hearings, informed his lawyer, Edward Morgan, that Castro had masterminded Kennedy's assassination. Roselli also indicated that the Mafia and the CIA had collaborated in a number of the CIA's plots to kill the Cuban Premier. As rumors of the CIA's previous assassination attempts continued to unfold, a number of critics of the agency went one step further and suggested that the CIA itself might have murdered the President. Robert Kennedy was concerned enough about the rumors of CIA involvement to ask Richard Helms, who had become director of the CIA in 1966, whether the CIA had murdered his brother.³⁹ Although there is no evidence that the CIA was directly involved in Kennedy's murder, President Johnson was soon persuaded that the CIA's plots to murder Castro had triggered the assassination of President Kennedy.

When J. Edgar Hoover learned of Roselli's allegations he indicated that the FBI would investigate the charges. On March 17, President Johnson learned of Hoover's decision and immediately pressured the FBI to open an investigation. Hoover, who had known all along that the allegations were true, gave the President a report on March 22 which substantiated Roselli's assertion that the CIA had used underworld figures in previous assassination plots against Castro. That evening Johnson met with Richard Helms. The following day Helms ordered the CIA Inspector General to prepare a complete report on the CIA's assassination plots. The report, which was given to Johnson a few weeks later, documented the previous assassination attempts and the use of the mafia by the CIA against Castro. Although evidence that Castro had responded to the plots against his own life by killing Kennedy could not be proven, Johnson was convinced that there was a conspiracy. He would later tell reporters, "I will tell you something that will rock you. Kennedy was trying to get Castro, but Castro got him first."⁴⁰

The machinations of the CIA and the FBI to conceal information relating to the assassination from the President and the American people presented Johnson with an anomalous situation. Publicly he defended the Warren Commission and argued that there was no evidence of a conspiracy in

the President's death. Privately Johnson knew that there was evidence which, if it did not prove a conspiracy, at least raised serious questions about the thoroughness of the Warren Commission's investigation. Ironically, while Johnson was being accused of blocking a new investigation of the assassination, he discovered that his own efforts to find the truth had been thwarted by the American intelligence community. Johnson realized that the controversy surrounding the assassination was undermining his credibility, but could not share his doubts, or the information he had about the CIA with the American public. To have done so would have further undermined faith in American institutions at home, and would have run the risk of fanning emotions about the assassination to such a fevered pitch that hysteria and demands for vengeance might have swept the country. Personally the President might have benefited from a new, more complete investigation. Politically he had good reason to doubt whether the nation could withstand the shock.

The atmosphere of doubt, rumor and mistrust which followed Johnson throughout his White House years was fueled and sustained by unanswered questions about the death of President Kennedy. Few listened to the absurd charge that Johnson had personally masterminded the assassination, but the belief that the President, and his administration, conspired to cover up vital information gained widespread acceptance. Johnson watched, helplessly, as the credibility of American institutions was attacked by a host of "citizen scholars" who refused to allow the assassination to fade from public consciousness. Continuing concerns about the assassination robbed Johnson of a sense of legitimacy, limited his options, obscured his own achievements, and exaggerated his natural desire for acceptance and recognition. After he left the presidency Johnson remembered with bitterness, "I took the oath, I became President. But for millions of Americans I was still illegitimate, a naked man with no presidential covering, a pretender to the throne, an illegal usurper The whole thing was almost unbearable."⁴¹ Unlike other Presidents who assumed office under normal circumstances, Johnson was not able to capitalize on the usual public perception that a change in the presidency would usher in a new and more glorious epoch in history. Instead for Johnson the Kennedy assassination opened wounds which would fester

and lead to bitter turmoil. Johnson might have been able to limit or at least control the impact of the assassination had he been able to persuade the people that the Warren Commission's conclusions were valid. He could not. He too had become a victim of the assassination.

Notes

¹National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas (hereafter cited LBJ Papers), Oral History Project, Leon Jaworski; *ibid.*, Special File on the Assassination of JFK, Executive Order 1130; *ibid.*, LBJ Press Conference, November 27, 1963; Earl Warren, *The Memoirs of Earl Warren* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 355-356.

²Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), p. 26; for similar expressions of concern see LBJ Papers, WHCF, Helen Fleshna to LBJ, November 26, 1963; R.F. Massart to LBJ, November 25, 1963; Victor Irborg to LBJ, November 24, 1963; Louis Black to LBJ, November 22, 1963.

³LBJ Papers, Aides Files, Moyers, Donald Wilson, Acting Director (USIA, Memorandum to LBJ, November 25, 1963).

⁴LBJ Papers, Aides Files, Moyers, "Foreign Reaction to the Presidential Succession," December 6, 1963; USIA Report, "World Reaction to Oswald's Slaying," November 25, 1963; *ibid.*, WHCF, Theodore Moscos to George Reedy, November 23, 1963.

⁵Warren, *Memoirs*, pp. 357-358.

⁶For examples see LBJ Papers, WHCF, Dwight Eller to LBJ, November 23, 1963; Clarence Elam to LBJ, December 6, 1963.

⁷LBJ Papers, WHCF, Allen Dulles to LBJ, September 28, 1964; Earl Warren, et al., *Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy* (Washington: Govt. Printing Office, 1964), pp. 1-18; *Hearings Before the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy*, 26 volumes (Washington: Govt. Printing Office, 1964); LBJ Papers, WHCF, Harris Poll, October 19, 1964.

⁸LBJ Papers, WHCF, John McCone to LBJ, January 9, 1964.

⁹LBJ Papers, Oral History Project, Earl Warren.

¹⁰*Ibid.*; U.S. Congress, House, *Investigation of the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy: Hearings Before the Select Committee on Assassinations of the U.S. House of Representatives*, 95th Congress (Washington: U.S. Govt. Printing Office, 1978-1979), Vol. XI (hereafter cited HSCA).

¹¹LBJ Papers, National Security File (NSF), McGeorge Bundy to LBJ, Memorandum, Tuesday Luncheon, July 14, 1964.

¹²LBJ Papers, WHCF, McGeorge Bundy to LBJ, Memorandum for the Record, July 22, 1964; *ibid.*, McGeorge Bundy to Robert Kennedy, July 25, 1964.

¹³LBJ Papers, NSF, Robert Manning to McGeorge Bundy, July 11, 1964; William Donelly to the Department of State, October 7, 1964; Cabot to the Secretary of State, October 6, 1963; *ibid.*, WHCF, USIA Report, "Initial World Press Reaction to the Warren Commission Report," October 1, 1964.

¹⁴For early critics of the Warren Commission see Thomas C. Buchanan, *Who Killed Kennedy?* (New York: Putnam, 1964), and Joachim Joesten, *Oswald, Assassin or Fall Guy?* (New York: Marzani and Munsell, 1964). For books in 1966 and 1967 see Mark Lane, *Rush to Judgment* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966); Edward J. Epstein, *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth* (New York: Bantam, 1966); Richard H. Popkin, *The Second Oswald* (New York: Avon Books, 1966); Leo Sauvage, *The Oswald Affair: An Examination of the Contradictions and Omission of the Warren Report* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1966); Harold Weisberg, *Whitewash* (New York: Dell, 1966-1967); Josiah Thompson, *Six Seconds in Dallas: A Microstudy of the Kennedy Assassination* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1967); Penn Jones, *Forgive My Grief* (Midlothian Mirror).

¹⁵For a discussion of the ballistics evidence see Warren, *Report of the President's Commission*, pp. 61-117; HSCA, V. VII; Epstein, *Inquest*.

¹⁶Lane, *Rush to Judgment*; LBJ Papers, WHCF, R.D. Fowler to LBJ, October 16, 1966; Paul Popple to R.D. Fowler, October 31, 1966.

¹⁷Joachim Joesten, *The Dark Side of Lyndon Baines Johnson* (London: Peter Dawnay, LTC, 1968), p. 233; LBJ Papers, WHCF, Don

Price to Joseph Califano, March 27, 1967.

¹⁸LBJ Papers, Daily Diary Backup, November 20, 1966; *ibid.*, Special File on the Assassination of JFK, Press Conference, John Connally, November 23, 1966.

¹⁹LBJ Papers, WHCF, Fred Panzer to LBJ, May 26, 1966; Henry Wilson to Theodore Duperman, September 29, 1966; Leo Marks to Robert E. Kintner, December 20, 1966; *Life Magazine*, November 20, 1966.

²⁰For accounts of the Garrison investigation see Jim Garrison, *A Heritage of Stone* (New York: Putnam, 1970); James Kirkwood, *American Grotesque: An Account of the Clay Shaw-Jim Garrison Affair in New Orleans* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970).

²¹LBJ Papers, Special File on the Assassination of JFK, Hugh Ayesworth to George Christian, May 5, 1967.

²²LBJ Papers, WHCF, Fred Panzer to LBJ, September 15, 1967; *ibid.*, Special File on the Assassination of JFK, Jack Valenti to LBJ, October 22, 1966; Valenti to LBJ, October 29, 1966.

²³LBJ Papers, WHCF, John Roche to LBJ, November 17, 1966; Roche to LBJ, November 23, 1966.

²⁴LBJ Papers, WHCF, Charles Maguire to Robert Kintner, November 25, 1966; Robert Kintner to LBJ, December 2, 1966; Memorandum, Staff Meeting, December 2, 1966.

²⁵For a complete discussion see HSCA, Vols. I, V and VII.

²⁶For a complete discussion see HSCA, Vol. VII; see also Robert Sam Anson, *They've Killed the President* (New York: Bantam, 1975), pp. 70-102.

²⁷LBJ Papers, NSF, McGeorge Bundy to Nicholas Katzenbach, April 13, 1965; Gordon Chase to McGeorge Bundy, January 15, 1965; Lawson B. Knott to Gordon Chase, January 15, 1965.

²⁸LBJ Papers, NSF, McGeorge Bundy to Bill Boyers, September 1, 1965; *ibid.*, WHCF, Henry Wilson to Theodore Kupferman, September 29, 1966.

²⁹LBJ Papers, WHCF, John Roche to LBJ, November 17, 1966; for typical correspondence questioning the Warren Commission Report see *ibid.*, Paul Longstreet to LBJ, September 27, 1967; Frank M. Qozencraft to Congressman Wendell Wyatt, March 8, 1967; Harold Weisberg to LBJ, November 5, 1966.

³⁰See *Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities*, U.S. Senate, 94th Cong. 2nd Sess., April, 1976; *The Investigation of the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy: Performance of Intelligence Agencies*, Book V, p. 32; James McKinley, *Assassination in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 166-168; Anson, *They've Killed the President*, pp. 45-48, 154-156, 165-166.

³¹HSCA, V. X, pp. 147-197.

³²William Manchester, *The Death of the President: November 20-25, 1963* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 339-352, 367-368, 377-378; McKinley, *Assassination in America*, pp. 101-128.

³³HSCA, V. II, p. 436; V. III, p. 749; V. VII, pp. 475-644; see also Edward J. Epstein, *Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978).

³⁴Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), p. 678.

³⁵*Intelligence Agencies*, pp. 2-6, 11, 27-28; HSCA, III, I, 102, 702-704; V. X; Leon Janos, "The Last Days of the President," *Atlantic Monthly* (July, 1973), p. 39.

³⁶*Intelligence Agencies*, pp. 11-12, 28, 30-31; HSCA, V. X; *Hearings, Warren Commission*, XXV, p. 647; Anthony Summers, *Conspiracy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), pp. 436, 440-441.

³⁷*Ibid.* ³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹*Ibid.*; Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, p. 643; for a conspiracy theory on the CIA see Michael Canfield and Alan J. Weberman, *Coup d'Etat in America: The CIA and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Third Press, 1975).

⁴⁰*Intelligence Agencies*, pp. 85-86, 105-106; LBJ Papers, President's Diary, March 22, 1967; Marvin Watson to Cartha De Loach, April 4, 1967; Robert Sherrill, *The Accidental President* (New York: Grossman, 1967), p. 4.

⁴¹Quoted in Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 177.