

Post Daily Magazine

The Warren Report And Its Critics

ARTICLE IV: The First Dissenters

By MICHAEL J. BERLIN

THE IDEA OF assassination by a lone madman—almost the traditional pattern in the U. S.—was hard to believe in the rest of the world, where assassination by conspiracy has been a tool of political change. In the U. S., too, after initial acceptance, the "official version" was hard to swallow.

As the Warren Commission worked in secret to sort out fact from illusion, theories of conspiracy proliferated, and they covered the ground quite thoroughly:

American Communists, Russian Communists ("Oswald was brainwashed by the Russians"), pro-Castro Cubans, anti-Castro Cubans, the Mafia ("Jack Ruby had underworld connections"), American oil monopolists ("Kennedy wanted to cut the oil depletion allowance"), Dallas right-wingers, Southern bigots, the FBI, the CIA, a junta of American military leaders, John F. Kennedy himself ("a suicide arrangement—he was suffering from an incurable disease"). Perhaps inevitably, the wilder theories drew Lyndon Johnson into it after a while.

Some of these early theorists may themselves have been irrational—at least in their reaction to the assassination. Others were writing for money, to satisfy a public demand. Some, with leftist backgrounds, seemed intent on proving a right-wing plot. But some writers had been shocked by the methods and misinformation of both Dallas and federal police, as much as by the assassination itself.

The first critics of the "official version" were newspapermen who covered the Dallas investigations, such as Richard Dudman of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and a handful of foreign correspondents.

While American publications waited politely for the Warren Report, the conspiracy theories poured out in Europe.

Joachim Joesten, a prolific free-lance writer who had been a Soviet apologist during the war and later wrote a controversial profile of Lucky Luciano, spread the notion in "Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?" that elements of the FBI, the CIA, a retired general and an oil tycoon had conspired to kill Kennedy and frame Oswald.

Joesten's second book, published in German, suggested that Ruby hired an impersonator of Oswald to kill Gov. Connally of Texas, not Kennedy—on orders from organized crime (because Connally was cracking down).

There are reports that Joesten's next effort—seven privately published volumes, to be sold for \$200—will go even further.

Thomas Buchanan ("Who Killed Kennedy?") is an American, a computer programming executive living in Paris. He programs five accomplices, including Oswald, for the assassination.

In 1948, Buchanan admitted membership in the Communist Party and the Washington Star fired him as its medical writer. He says he left the party in 1954.

But apparently some bitterness against the U. S. Establishment remains. Buchanan's suspicions are aroused because Oswald, a known subversive, worked as a "municipal employee" in the "municipal book depository," when "this is impossible in the U. S."

The Texas book depository, however, is a private enterprise. Many other "facts" in Buchanan's book are similarly fictions.

★ ★ ★
OTHER WRITERS WERE JUST AS COMMITTED TO conspiracy, but a bit more concerned with the facts. Leo Sauvage, for 18 years the American correspondent of Le Figaro, a conservative Paris daily, says: "The whole thing was monstrous. I arrived in Dallas on Sunday, after Oswald was shot, and even then there was a willingness of most correspondents to believe what they were told."

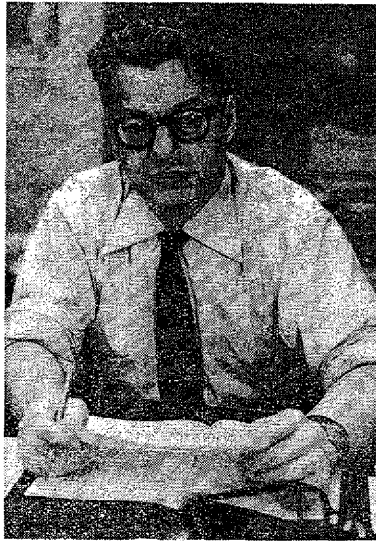
"My first impression was that there was no serious investigation. On Monday they said the case was closed. Yet they had not even questioned Oswald's neighbors to seek out persons he had associated with. It takes only a normal person to be suspicious of that. And psychologically they asked a lot of us, to believe in a lone madman."

"Why get excited? I don't like to be taken for an idiot."

The insult to his professional pride and his inability to believe in a madman who could sometimes act quite sane are the keys to Sauvage's prejudice against the Warren Commission's investigation.

His book, "The Oswald Affair," was completed just after release of the Warren Report, but he had started writing it long before. It was printed in France, but ran into publisher trouble in the U. S., where few firms were willing, at that time, to challenge the Report. L'Affaire Oswald is written as a conscious parallel to L'Affaire Dreyfus (Dreyfus, remember, stylistically, on the Kennedy assassination).

At a time when the Warren Report stood virtually unquestioned, Sauvage raised point after point to challenge the manner in which the Report presented



LEO SAUVAGE

'Psychologically they asked a lot of us . . .'

its evidence, and to deny that this evidence was enough to prove Oswald guilty. Sauvage is convinced that Oswald was framed.

Sauvage has also been called, by a member of the Commission staff, "the world's greatest nitpicker." Today, both critics and defenders of the "lone assassin" theory have gone beyond Sauvage's book in their debate over the facts.

If the Sauvage book makes the most acceptable reading, then Harold Weisberg's work is the most painful.

Weisberg, 53, is a man obsessed by the assassination.

"I went to Washington in 1934 or '35," he says, "and worked in an assortment of government jobs. You always had to have a preconception. Research very often had to be tailored."

After wartime service in the OSS, Weisberg bought a chicken farm in Hyattstown, Md. "Then, about 1963, low-flying government helicopters started coming directly over our land. The flocks stopped laying." The inoperative farm is now up for sale.

"Before the assassination I had considered writing books on my farming experience, or on noise . . . but the assassination is what turned me on. The day it happened I was as shocked as everyone else. I told my wife, Lillian, 'They've gotta kill him (Oswald). The police are doing all they can to make this man untryable.' The Wednesday after the assassination I went to the Washington Post and gave one of the

reporters a whole list of questions . . . I felt to begin with that there was more than we knew.

"My work has monopolized our lives. My wife and I have over 22,000 hours on this. It's hard to say why without your thinking I'm a nut. I felt it's something I owed. We're about \$15,000 in debt.

"Anyone who knows government would assume that what happened had to happen. My point was to destroy the Report . . ."

★ ★ ★
WEISBERG SAYS HE WORKED 20 HOURS A DAY on "Whitewash." Publisher after publisher rejected it, and Weisberg had to print the book privately. His book is shrill. It is poorly organized. It is an exhaustive (and exhausting) survey of virtually every possible misstep the Commission made in translating the evidence into its report.

In "Whitewash," and again in his second book, "Whitewash II," Weisberg points to a picture (showing the Presidential motorcade and the Book Depository behind it, just after the first bullet hit Kennedy) and says: "If for no other reason, this picture was cropped . . . because it destroys the entire Report and proves Oswald's innocence."

He deduces from the location of the motorcade in the picture that the assassin's first bullet was fired earlier than the Commission reported—fired at a time when the view from the Depository's sixth floor was blocked by branches of a tree (except for one fleeting instant between branches). Weisberg implies that the cropping of the picture and what he describes as the falsification of other evidence was the intentional work of the FBI.

Weisberg's books ("Whitewash II" has been out a few months; "Whitewash III" is due out shortly; both are, again, privately printed) present almost all the questions the Warren Report left unanswered. But the only way Weisberg's researches can build an assassination theory without Oswald in it is to assume that much of the material evidence has been faked.

★ ★ ★
RICHARD POPKIN, A PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR at the University of California, San Diego (and the author some years back of "The History of Skepticism"), has taken the possibility that someone impersonated Oswald—mentioned by both Sauvage and Weisberg—and has turned it into "The Second Oswald."

In this little book, he sets forth an alternative explanation of the evidence, something that few other critics have essayed. It's all very fascinating—but improvable.

Penn Jones, the editor of the Midlothian Mirror, a weekly near Dallas, has devoted these last years to a pilgrimage in search of new evidence. He hasn't found much on the Kennedy assassination, but he has found fear among the people involved. He and other investigators say they have encountered harassment by the police in their attempts to interview witnesses.

One reason for the fear may be Jones' own theory that key dramatic persons are being bumped off, mysteriously, one by one—at least count the total was 19. Ever: Dorothy Kilgallen was on his list.

★ ★ ★
SINCE THE APPEARANCE OF THE WARREN REPORT, and the debate over its validity, there has arisen a cult of people who have been called "assassination buffs."

They come from all walks of life, and they look into specialized aspects of the assassination in their spare time. Virtually all of them are sincere and "normal," but it takes a special kind of person to adopt the Kennedy assassination as a hobby.

Mrs. Sylvia Meagher, a career researcher for the World Health Organization (she also represents WHO at meetings of other UN bodies) has already compiled a "subject index" to the Report and the 26 volumes (the Commission didn't provide one). She is writing a book, she says, which will contain all the pros and cons of all points in dispute, and will be published by Bobbs Merrill in the fall. "If I hurry," Mrs. Meagher is among the hardened doubters of the Commission.

When asked if she were considering a particular point that might explain how Oswald could have committed the crime, she said:

"I hope you don't expect me to defend every point by every crank that ever lived. It took me two years to master the 26 volumes and decide what is valid and what is to be questioned."

Another buff believes that the Grassy Knoll was one huge camouflage, although he says "I'll deny it if you print it. People would think I was a nut." There were, he says, five trees on the knoll during the assassination, only four now. He's not sure whether there was a sniper in the fake tree, or behind it. And he believes there was a network of steps that went down into the knoll itself—that the knoll was really a pillbox, which was filled in later on.

These buffs have turned up new evidence, new witnesses. In the absence of an official investigation, they are the sole sources of answers to the questions that remain. But virtually all of them are dedicated to proving a conspiracy. Most are not seeking information, or even willing to consider information, that might explain how Oswald could have done it.

TOMORROW: Mark Lane and Edward Epstein