

Who Killed John Kennedy? After 25

By PHILIP SHENON
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Years, More Theories

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Than Certainty

WASHINGTON, Nov. 17 — A quarter-century after gunshots echoed across Dealey Plaza in Dallas and left the President mortally wounded, investigators, scientists and the public seem no closer to a consensus about the circumstances of John F. Kennedy's assassination.

For many students of the events of Nov. 22, 1963, all that really seems clear is their ignorance. They know they may never understand exactly what happened that day, or why.

They may never have conclusive evidence that President Kennedy was the victim of a single, unstable gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald, or the target of a conspiracy that, depending on the theorist, may have involved the Mafia, the Governments of Cuba and the Soviet Union, radical right-wing groups or perhaps even elements of the American intelligence community.

"It does not seem likely that these mysteries will ever be solved," said Representative Louis Stokes, an Ohio Democrat who a decade ago led a House inquiry into the assassination. "I think it's more likely than not that we'll never know."

As a group, Federal investigators have yet to settle on a single theory. A Presidential commission led by Chief Justice Earl Warren, which included some of the nation's most prominent lawyers and public servants, found in 1964 that there was no evidence to prove a conspiracy.

Fifteen years later, the Congressional panel headed by Mr. Stokes contradicted the commission, finding that Mr. Oswald had probably not acted alone and that the conspiracy might have included organized crime figures.

And the Justice Department said last year that it had closed its own inquiry into the Kennedy assassination by siding with the Warren panel. The department found "no persuasive evidence" to support arguments for a conspiracy.

Backing for Commission, And Opposition, Too

The public at first seemed receptive to the conclusions of the Warren Commission, and many still accept them.

In an article to appear Sunday in The New York Times Magazine, David W. Belin, a Des Moines lawyer who served as counsel to the panel, writes, "Any American who takes the time to examine the overall record will agree that the Warren Commission was right."

"Each and every attempt to prove otherwise can be refuted," he says. "The truth has a long fuse, and ultimately it prevails."

But almost immediately after its re-

lease, the commission's report came under attack by critics, some of them reputable scientists and criminal investigators, who said the panel had been seriously misled or had overlooked compelling evidence of a broad conspiracy.

Perhaps most vexing, the critics said, were the questions about Mr. Oswald that had been left unanswered by the Warren Commission, particularly those involving his connections to the Mafia and to Cuba.

David E. Kaiser, an associate professor of history at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh who has studied the assassination theories and believes there may have been a Mafia conspir-

acy, said that Mr. Oswald "is an amazingly suspicious character," that "it is possible to believe most anything about him and damned near impossible to know what's true."

Was It a Conspiracy? The Public Thinks So

One thing that the public as a whole has come to believe about him is that he did not act alone: for the last two decades, opinion polls have found rejection of the Warren Commission's findings.

According to a recent New York Times/CBS News Poll, 66 percent of Americans believe there was a conspiracy to kill President Kennedy, as against 13 percent who believe Mr. Oswald was alone responsible and 21 percent who express no opinion. Sixty-one percent agree that there has been an "official coverup to keep the public from learning the truth about the Kennedy assassination." And nearly half, 46 percent, believe it would now be impossible to establish the full truth about the President's death. Partly for this reason, 59 percent oppose further investigations into the killing.

The poll, in which 1,518 adults were interviewed by telephone Oct. 8-10, had

a margin of sampling error of plus or minus three percentage points.

House Panel Dismissed A Castro Connection

Mr. Oswald, one of the most curious assassins in the annals of crime, was a 24-year-old former marine who had traveled to the Soviet Union in 1959 and did not return home for more than two years. He was a fervent supporter of Fidel Castro, the Cuban leader, who, it was later learned, had been made a target for assassination by the Central Intelligence Agency. Shortly before the Kennedy shooting, he had visited Mexico in an effort to secure a visa from the Cuban Embassy for travel to Cuba.

The public's belief that he had accomplices was bolstered in 1979 by Mr. Stokes's panel, the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which concluded after a two-year inquiry that President Kennedy was "probably assassinated as the result of a conspiracy." The finding was based largely on the results of an acoustical examination of the assassination site that indicated a second gunman.

But the panel found no strong evidence to link Mr. Castro to the shooting.

Many conspiracy theorists agree that although the Cuban leader knew he was a C.I.A. target and may have wanted to strike back against the President, he would not have used an unstable assassin like Mr. Oswald. And the timing seemed wrong: the relationship between Cuba and the United States had appeared to be warming.

Mr. Stokes traveled to Cuba as part of his panel's investigation and met with Mr. Castro. "I asked him directly whether he was involved in the assassination," the Congressman said in a recent interview. "And he told me, 'Listen, I would have to be crazy to kill the President of the United States. They would wipe my little country off the face of the earth.'"

"I believed him," Mr. Stokes said.

"Castro is too intelligent to be involved."

For many of the same sorts of reasons, the committee also ruled out involvement by the Soviet Union and other foreign governments. And it discounted rumors that the Federal Bureau of Investigation might have been involved.

The Arguments For a Mafia Conspiracy

The panel instead suggested that the culprits might have — but had not necessarily — included organized crime figures like Carlos Marcello, the leader of the New Orleans mob, and James R. Hoffa, who at the time was president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, had associated with Mafia leaders and was a particularly bitter foe of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, the President's brother.

The finding was based in part on evidence that tied both Mr. Oswald and Jack Ruby, the Texas nightclub owner who gunned down Mr. Oswald two days after the Kennedy assassination, to organized crime.

Mr. Oswald was the nephew of a New Orleans bookmaker associated with the New Orleans crime network run by Mr. Marcello, and was close to another man connected to the Marcello organization, David Ferrie. Mr. Ruby had been involved with the Mafia since his childhood in Chicago and had been linked to Mr. Marcello and another underworld leader, Santo Trafficante of Tampa, Fla.

Mr. Marcello, who is still alive and has denied involvement in the Kennedy assassination, had a long-running feud with the Justice Department and with Robert Kennedy, who had vowed to

crush the American Mafia and had singled out Mr. Marcello.

By eliminating President Kennedy, the theory goes, the Mafia could remove his brother, its real nemesis, from power at the Justice Department. The theory holds that John Kennedy was a more inviting target for assassination than Robert Kennedy since the President, if he remained alive, would be likely to appoint a new Attorney General with a comparable distaste for the Mafia. And Mr. Ruby was ordered to silence Mr. Oswald, according to the theory, because of concerns that Mr. Oswald was unstable and might disclose the conspiracy to investigators.

A New Orleans Address And a Cuban Link

Others have suggested that the President was the target of reactionary groups and anti-Castro Cubans dismayed in part by his last-minute decision to withhold American air support from Cuban exiles in the Bay of Pigs invasion a year and a half earlier.

These theorists note that while living in New Orleans in the months before the assassination, Mr. Oswald handed out leaflets for a pro-Castro group, the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

The leaflets identified the group's local address as 544 Camp Street. The conspiracy theorists point out that the building at that address also housed the offices of a former F.B.I. agent, Guy Banister, who was active in radical right-wing causes and who has been closely tied in published reports to anti-Castro exiles and the C.I.A.

The theory that anti-Castro forces and elements of the C.I.A. were behind the killing seems hard to reconcile,

however, with Mr. Oswald's oft-stated support for the Cuban Government.

Conflicting Assessments Of Various Tests

The House panel's assertion of a conspiracy was bolstered by testimony from acoustics experts who said an audiotape from the site of the assassination strongly indicated that there had been at least two gunmen.

That assessment has since been disputed, however. In 1982, a panel of the National Academy of Sciences found that the tape did not support findings of a second gunman, that instead noises earlier identified as gunshots had actually been made about a minute after the President was slain. The chairman of the academy panel said these noises were probably nothing more than police radio static.

That Mr. Oswald was at least a key figure in the assassination is beyond dispute for most scholars.

Ballistic tests showed that cartridge cases found after the assassination on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, where Mr. Oswald worked and where the President's motorcade had passed just a moment before he was shot, had been fired by the rifle that Mr. Oswald had purchased from a Chicago weapons company under an alias.

But many scholars say the Warren Commission went too far when it argued that Mr. Oswald's rifle was responsible for all the shots fired into Dealey Plaza.

A number of conspiracy theorists say that evidence of a second gunman can be found in a film of the assassination made by Abraham Zapruder, a dress manufacturer who captured the

scene on his home movie camera.

Analysis of the film indicated that it would have been impossible for President Kennedy and Gov. John B. Connally of Texas, who was traveling in the President's limousine and was wounded in the shooting, to have been hit by separate bullets fired from the book depository; Mr. Oswald could not have fired the rifle fast enough.

After making its own scientific analysis, the Warren Commission therefore concluded that one of the two bullets that hit the President — the one that struck him in the neck before he was hit fatally in the back of the head — must also have hit the Governor.

But for some scientists, it was impossible to believe that the two men were hit by the same bullet. According to their analysis, the path of that round through the President's neck meant that it could not have hit Mr. Connally.

Mr. Connally agrees; he has said repeatedly that he was hit by a separate bullet — a conclusion that, if true, would indicate that Mr. Oswald prob-

ably received assistance from another gunman.

G. Robert Blakey, a law professor at the University of Notre Dame who was chief counsel to the House assassinations panel, said that while he accepted the Warren Commission's single-bullet theory, he still leaned toward believing that a second gunman was at the scene.

In his theory, the second gunman may have fired at the President from what reports on the Kennedy assassination commonly refer to as "the grassy knoll," an area ahead and to the right of the President's motorcade on Elm Street; the book depository was also on the right, but behind the motorcade.

"There were 20 people who said they heard shots from the grassy knoll," Mr. Blakey said.

But as Mr. Blakey acknowledged, proving that there were two gunmen in Dealey Plaza on Nov. 22 would only raise another question that will probably never be answered conclusively. Even if there was proof of shots from the two locations, he said, "we couldn't confirm who the two shooters were."



Associated Press

Shortly after the assassination of President Kennedy, reporters stood at the spot in the Texas School Book Depository Building from which Lee Harvey Oswald's rifle was fired.