

# JFK conspiracy theories persist

By HOWELL WECHSLER  
Staff writer

At 12:30 p.m., shots rang out at the presidential motorcade. A few seconds later, the blood-spattered First Lady cradled her husband's head in her lap and cried out, "My God, they've killed Jack, they've killed my husband."

**They.** It was a cry of instinct. It had to be *they*. In that moment of terror, how could anyone believe that the leader of the most powerful nation in the world had been killed by a lone assassin, an unknown nobody, for reasons that will never be clear?

Afterwards, Jacqueline Kennedy never disputed the Warren Commission's findings that Lee Harvey Oswald killed President Kennedy on his own.

But, for many other Americans, the belief that some group was behind the assassination has not faded. A few of the conspiracy theories — those involving the FBI, CIA, KGB (Russian secret police), organized crime, Cuban government and anti-Castro Cubans — have lasted through the years, growing stronger as the country learned more about the illicit activities of the intelligence agencies.

**PART OF THE** reason these theories are so attractive is that it's easy to ascribe motives for wanting Kennedy dead.

The President's brother Robert, then attorney general, was waging a strong campaign against organized crime, perhaps the greatest legal challenge the syndicate faced in decades. Rob-

ert Kennedy also infuriated FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover by trying to assert control over the bureau.

The anti-Castro Cubans hated President Kennedy because they thought he let them down at the Bay of Pigs, a feeling the CIA, humiliated by the Bay fiasco, probably shared. The Cuban government might have been retaliating for CIA efforts to assassinate Castro, while the Soviet leaders had recently been devastated by Kennedy's triumph in the Cuban missile crisis.

**THE HOUSE** Select Committee on Assassinations checked out those theories in its two-year investigation of the assassination, which is expected to be completed by the end of the year. Committee member Rep. Floyd Fithian, 2nd District Democrat, said in a recent interview that the panel has not found any evidence that there was a *they* or that Oswald was part of a conspiracy.

The most troubling question facing the committee, Fithian said, involves Jack Ruby, the Dallas nightclub owner who shot Oswald to death two days after the assassination.

It has long been known that Ruby had some sort of connections with organized crime. But when the HSCA found that Ruby made numerous calls to mobsters shortly before the assassination, those connections took on a new meaning.

**THE COMMITTEE** also heard what its chief counsel called "impressive" testi-

mony that Oswald was seen on different occasions with David Ferrie in the summer of 1963. Ferrie worked for Carlos Marcello, crime boss for Louisiana and Texas. If Oswald was a tool of the Syndicate, Ruby might have been ordered to shut him up for good, according to one prevalent theory.

However, a link with organized crime does not equate with a conspiracy to kill the president or silence Oswald, Fithian said. Ruby was not an important organized crime official, and although the mobsters had the motive and capacity to kill the president, Fithian argued, that does not prove anything.

"What is left to the individual who's going to be honest with himself is the evidence," he said. "And the evidence that they participated in the assassination is extremely thin."

Fithian said the committee will look closely at the Ruby-organized crime link before making a final decision. "That will be the most difficult part of the deliber-



**LEE OSWALD**  
*An unknown nobody*

ations," he predicted.

**THERE PROBABLY** would have been a great deal of speculation about conspiracies even if Oswald had lived a quiet, innocuous life before Nov. 22, 1963. But Oswald's life was filled with actions and associations

that could raise conspiracy questions in the least skeptical of minds.

He was an ex-Marine who served at a base in Japan where U2 spy flights were based and CIA agents were trained; a radar operator whose work included scouting for Russian planes; an avowed, though unsophisticated, Marxist who defected to Russia in 1959, then returned to the United States three years later after apparently becoming disenchanted with the Soviet lifestyle.

Despite betraying his country in the middle of the Cold War, Oswald encountered no American obstacles to his return home with a Russian wife — the niece of a Soviet secret police colonel — and child. In fact, the U.S. State Department loaned Oswald the money he needed for the trip. Many people have contended that Oswald might have received such favored treatment because he was involved in some kind of intelligence operation.

Fithian said he didn't see anything suspicious in Oswald's return. "If you defected to Russia and then said you wanted to return home, that you made a terrible mistake, I think the immigration officials would say 'come on back.'"

**WHEN HE GOT** to the United States, Oswald became actively involved in pro-Castro activities. He also apparently tried to join, or perhaps infiltrate, anti-Castro groups and, if some witnesses are to be believed, he succeeded.

That's a lot of material for people to spin conspiracy theories around. But recent government probes and Freedom of Information Act disclosures added new, and frightening, dimensions to the theories. Consider just a few of the facts that we now know about CIA and FBI behavior after the assassination.

- A few weeks after the assassination, a Russian defector, who claimed to have seen the KGB files on Oswald, defected to the United States. Although he was in CIA custody, the defector never appeared before the Warren Commission.

- The FBI never told the Warren Commission that Jack Ruby was an FBI informer.

- The CIA did not tell the Warren Commission about its plots to kill Castro.

- Shortly after Oswald was killed, a note he delivered to the Dallas FBI office was burned. The note threatened an FBI officer who was responsible for keeping an eye on the former defector. No one told the Warren Commission about it.

And there are other examples of deception and suppression of evidence. Why would the FBI and CIA impair the work of a presidential commission headed by the chief justice?

**THE FBI** coverups could have been an attempt to preserve the security, or the image, of the bureau, Fithian said. "It could just be Sunday-morning quarterbacking, but I have difficulty imagining the thrust to protect the institution being as strong as it was," he said. "But it's so unjustified to leap from these knowns, and

say 'ah hah, the FBI killed the president. That's just an atrocity.'"

Fithian said the CIA probably kept the Russian defector and the murder plots covered up because it wanted to keep them out of the press. "Judging by hindsight, I think it was a terrible error. But you have to get a little historical perspective. Go back to the tensions of the Cuban missile crisis and give yourself the responsibility of national security. If you put yourself in the position of the CIA, I doubt you'd be telling the world those things either."

There is "absolutely no evidence, not a scrap," that the CIA had anything to do with the assassination, Fithian said.

**BUT ONE CRITIC** of the Warren Commission says the murder of John Kennedy cannot be understood without realizing the role the intelligence agencies played in it.

"Even if Oswald did kill the president, his roots lie deep in the intelligence groups," said Carl Oglesby, a director of the Assassination Information Bureau, an organization devoted to research and public education on what it considers to be the suppression of the truth behind America's recent political murders.

"The committee has given us a better context of how organized crime and the clandestine and illegal activities of the intelligence organizations surround the case," Oglesby said. "If Oswald was a crazy kid who picked up a rifle that day, it's clear he was inspired by these groups.

"Their presence is the really important question. It's another example of how the people as a whole have been victimized by the deceptions and lies of the intelligence agencies."