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# The JFK inquiry: A tangled plot of intrigue and death

By Noel Warren

The biggest problem the strife-torn House Assassinations Committee may have during its two-year charter is to keep its witnesses from dying or becoming too intimidated to talk.

Investigators of the John F. Kennedy assassination have long fretted over the high mortality rate of witnesses. Conservative estimates show that at least 20 people connected with the assassination have died—many mysteriously.

An insurance actuary hired by the London *Sunday Times* to compute the life expectancy of the first 15 dead witnesses concluded that the odds were 100,000 trillion to one against all 15 dying as young as they did.

The most recent death was the "apparent suicide" on March 29 of

Russian immigrant George de Mohrenschildt, immediately after he learned that the assassination committee wanted to question him.

De Mohrenschildt's case is one of the most interesting. A friend of accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, he said shortly before his death that he felt "responsible for Oswald's behavior."

But he also testified before the Warren Commission in April 1964 that he had become friends with Jacqueline Kennedy and her mother, Janet Auchincloss, in Bellport, Long Island, in 1939, a year after he arrived in this country from Russia.

Mrs. Auchincloss wrote De Mohrenschildt soon after the assassination saying, "It seems extraordinary to me that you knew Jackie as a child. It is certainly a very strange world." She

added, "I hope, too, that Mrs. Oswald will not suffer."

De Mohrenschildt, who committed himself last fall to the psychiatric unit of the Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas—coincidentally, the same hospital where President Kennedy died—also made a bizarre confession to Dutch journalist Willem Oltmans shortly before his death.

Oltmans quoted him as saying that he was part of a "Dallas conspiracy" that consisted of various oilmen, a trucking-company executive and Cubans with "a blood debt to settle." Said De Mohrenschildt, "The Cubans thought President Kennedy had betrayed them at the Bay of Pigs."

Washington attorney Mark Lane, who for 13 years has investigated the  
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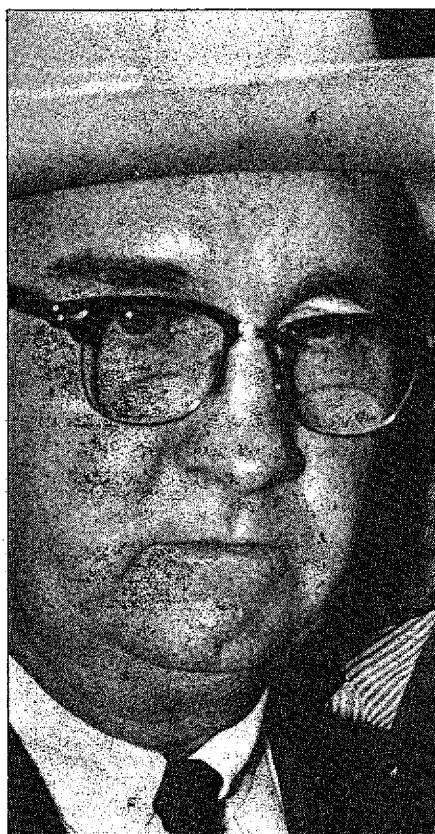
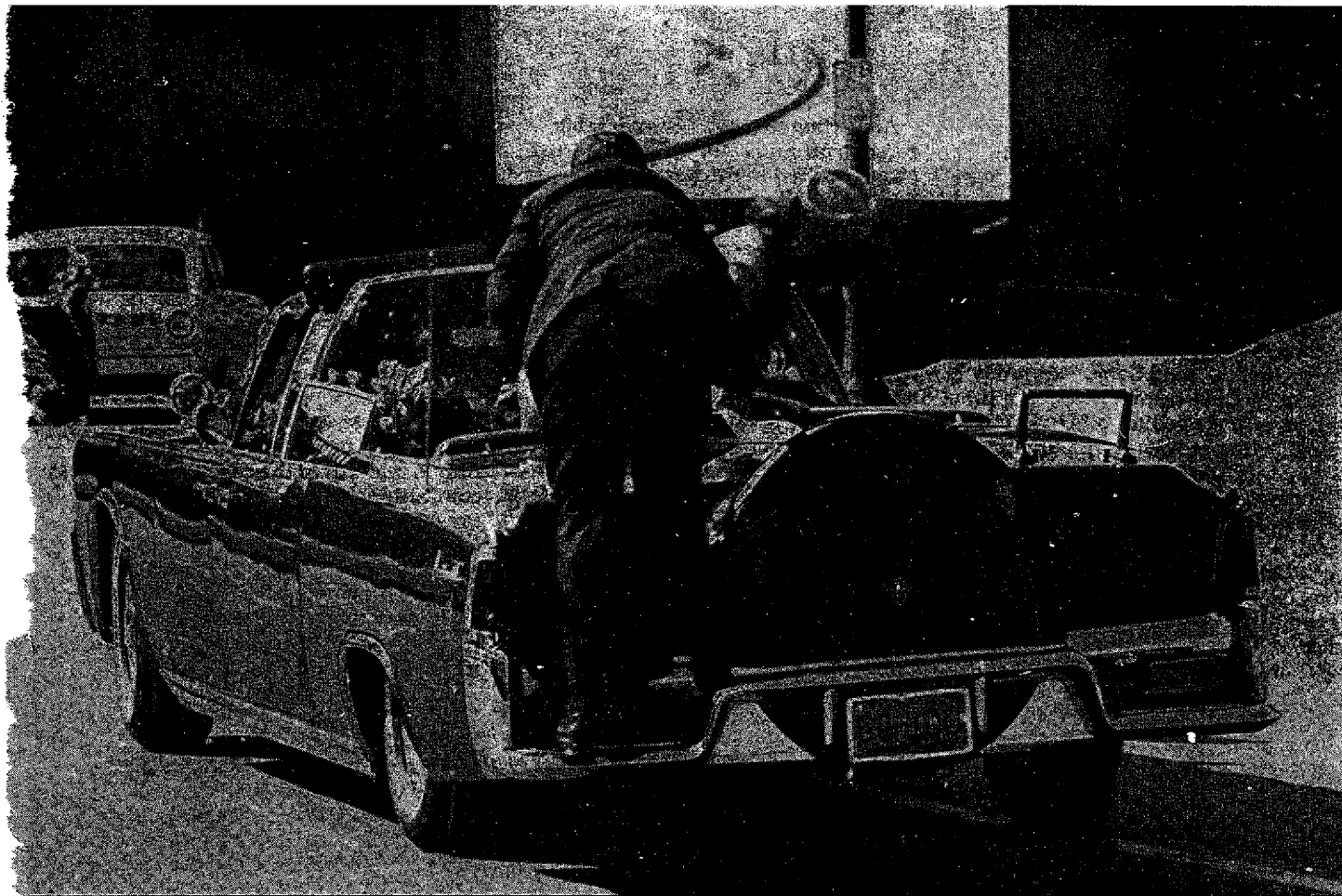
**On November 22, 1963, seconds before this photograph was taken, the fatal shot was fired. Since that time, conspiracy theories of President Kennedy's assassination have abounded. The House Assassinations Committee, with a special Kennedy subcommittee, is just beginning its two-year charter investigation.**



Columnist **Dorothy Kilgallen** developed an early interest in the Kennedy slaying and convinced a Dallas judge to let her interview Jack Ruby in his hospital bed shortly before his death. She said in early November 1965 that she would soon reveal to the world a "startling break" on the assassination. On November 8, before her announcement could reach the world, she was dead—from a lethal overdose of liquor and barbiturates.

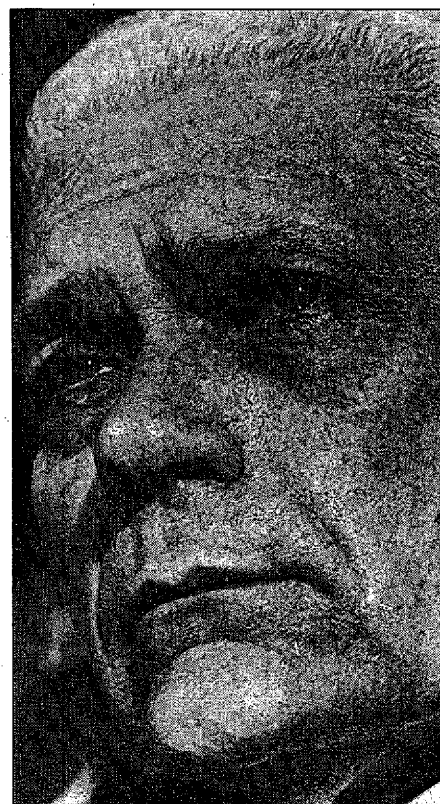
**Bill Hunter**, a Long Beach, Calif., reporter, beat the police to Ruby's apartment the night of November 24, 1963. He was shot by a police officer in April 1964, at the Long Beach police station. His death was ruled the result of a friendly game of cops and robbers in the police pressroom, but the police version changed in the course of the investigation.





**Tom Howard**, one of Ruby's lawyers, was present when Oswald was shot. He died in March 1965 of a heart attack, although he had no prior history of heart trouble.

**Sam Giancana** was shot to death in his Chicago home in 1975 after having been summoned to Capitol Hill to testify in connection with the Kennedy assassination. Like John Roselli, he was reportedly retired from organized crime at the time of his death. And, like Roselli, he'd been linked to the CIA's attempts on Castro's life.



**Clay Shaw** was indicted in New Orleans for conspiracy to assassinate JFK, but was exonerated. He was found dead shortly afterward on August 15, 1974. The exact cause of death was never established.

JFK assassination, and who was offered but declined the job of Chief Counsel to the House Assassinations Committee, says, "The deaths of so many witnesses has had a paralyzing effect upon surviving witnesses. People with knowledge of the assassination are terrified that they will be killed.

"Take the case of a man named Warren Reynolds," said Lane. "Reynolds claimed to have been a witness to the slaying of Dallas police officer J. D. Tippit, who the Warren Report concluded was killed by Oswald.

"Reynolds said he saw a man flee the scene of the crime with a gun in his hand, and described to the police that day a man very different from Oswald. Soon after, he was shot in the head. Reynolds didn't die, but after he recovered, he said, 'OK, now I'm willing to say it was Oswald.'

"The man charged with shooting Reynolds was Daryl Wayne Garner," Lane explained. "He provided an alibi that he had been with a woman named Betty MacDonald. Soon after, MacDonald was arrested and jailed for disturbing the peace. She was found dead in her cell, hanging from her treading pants."

According to Lane, "Garner later came to me and said, 'I'll tell the truth. I was involved in the Kennedy assassination—I was asked to participate.' He was stabbed to death before he had a chance to tell his story."

Penn Jones Jr., a former Texas publisher and author of a four-volume set of books on the Kennedy assassination investigation, claims to have documented evidence on many more suspicious deaths of assassination witnesses. The tales of violence read like a class-B movie:

Bill Hunter, a prize-winning reporter for the Long Beach (Calif.) *Press-Telegram*, who managed to get to Jack Ruby's apartment in Dallas before the police did after the Oswald shooting, was himself shot to death by a policeman. Hunter's partner, Jim Koethe, was killed by a karate chop to the neck.

Skeptics of the conspiracy theory point to the uncertain lifestyles of many of the dead witnesses. For example, three were strippers who worked for Jack Ruby and who were subsequently found dead under questionable circumstances. They argue that when you're dealing with the dregs of society, brutal and suspicious death is not at all uncommon.

But this argument doesn't apply to socialite Mary Pinchot Meyer, alleged mistress of President Kennedy. She was found shot near her Georgetown home.

Most authorities agree that it would still be premature to conclude that a conspiracy exists. But what can be said is that the conspiracy theories that a few years ago seemed so far-fetched are no longer a laughing matter.

"The House Assassination Committee staff will be studying everything that is relevant to the case," says subcommittee chairman Rep. Richardson Preyer (D.-N.C.). "De Mohrenschildt was considered an essential witness for us. Files on other possible witnesses who have died will be investigated.

"We must not make the mistake of assuming that any little fact is too unimportant to check out."

**Washington police examined the body of socialite Mary Pinchot Meyer after she was shot near her Georgetown home on October 12, 1963. They concluded the murder was the result of an attempted robbery. Her killer was never found.**

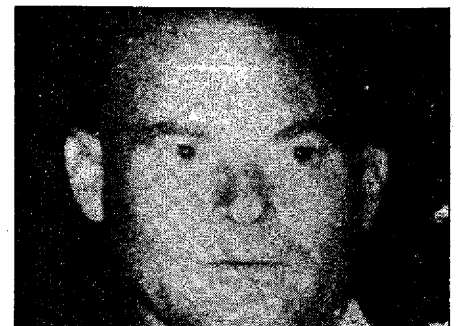


**George de Mohrenschildt** apparently committed suicide in Palm Beach, Fla., in March this year, after learning that the assassination committee's investigator wanted to question him.

**William Whaley**, the Dallas cab driver who drove Oswald to his getaway point the day of the assassination, was killed in an auto accident in December 1964.



**Teresa Norton**, above with JFK, was found shot to death in a motel room in August 1964.



**Hank Killam**, husband of one of Ruby's strippers and friend of a man staying in Oswald's rooming house, had his throat cut in March 1964.





**John Roselli**, a retired underworld figure, was found strangled and shot, in a barrel floating in Miami's Biscayne Bay in 1976. He had been involved in the CIA's plots to assassinate Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro.



#### MORE MYSTERIOUS DEATHS

**Mary Pinchot Meyer**, wealthy Washington society woman and alleged mistress of President Kennedy, was found shot near her Georgetown home on October 12, 1964. Her diary, said to chronicle her love affair with JFK shortly before his death, was later found and destroyed by a CIA official. Her killer was never found.

**Daryl Wayne Garner**, charged with shooting Warren Reynolds, came to Mark Lane after MacDonald died. He said: "I'll tell the truth. I was involved in the Kennedy assassination—I was asked to participate." Garner was stabbed to death before he had a chance to tell his story.

**Marilyn Delilah Walle**, a stripper in Ruby's bar, was shot to death a month after her marriage, within a year of the assassination.

**James Worrell** witnessed the assassination and saw a man—not Oswald—run from the Dallas book depository. In November 1964, he was killed in an auto accident.

**Bill Chesher**, said to have had information linking Oswald and Ruby, died of a heart attack in March 1964.

**Betty MacDonald** provided the alibi for Daryl Wayne Garner, the man charged with shooting Warren Reynolds. Soon after, she was arrested for disturbing the peace and put in jail. She was found in her cell, hanging from her toreador pants, in February 1964.

**Harold Russell** was a witness to Officer Tippit's slaying. In February 1964, he was killed by a policeman in a Dallas bar.

**Lee Bowers** witnessed cars moving behind the grassy knoll—the suspected location of a possible second assassin—before the President's assassination. In August 1964, Bowers' car ran into a bridge and he was killed.

**Jim Koethe**, a reporter, went to Ruby's apartment with Bill Hunter the night of Oswald's slaying. In September 1964, he stepped out of the shower at his home and was killed by a karate chop to the neck. His killer was never found.

**Eddy Benavides**, witness to Officer Tippit's slaying, was found shot in the head in February 1964. His killer was never found.