

Warren Commission was wrong— Prof. Cohen

An open mind, perhaps, is one of the most valuable attributes of a scholar. Ask Jacob Cohen, associate professor of American studies.

It's been a well-known fact in and around the Brandeis community that Jerry Cohen (as he's known to students and faculty alike) has entertained a fascination for the mysteries that even today enshroud the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

For the past 16 years, he has examined and re-examined every nook and cranny of the case, and he has been one of the more prominent—and certainly most zealous—advocates of the Warren Commission's findings that discounted any notion of a conspiracy in the 1963 murder of the President. But as any good scholar knows, new facts



Jerry Cohen: Scholarly concern over the assassination will strengthen

and new evidence can drastically alter one's conclusions. On Dec. 29 of this year—following the final hearing of the House Assassinations Committee on new evidence in the case—Jerry Cohen's 16-year-old conviction that there was no conspiracy had lost its strength.

On Jan. 9, Prof. Cohen published in a Boston weekly newspaper an extensive article explaining his and the Warren Commission's previous theory on the assassination with a detailed account of what the new evidence had done to that theory.

In simple terms, Prof. Cohen previously concluded that three shots were fired that fateful day in Dallas—one that hit both then-Gov. John

Connolly of Texas and President Kennedy, a second shot that probably fatally wounded the President, and a third shot that missed. He contended that the evidence showed the shots were fired by Lee Harvey Oswald alone, who had been perched at a sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository.

Suddenly, however, new evidence appeared. A tape, allegedly from the belt of a Dallas police officer who had accompanied the Presidential motorcade the day of the assassination, has been uncovered. How and why it has been withheld so long, no one seems to know. In any event, the acoustical evidence it provides, pointing to a fourth bullet fired from the famous "grassy knoll," has forced Brandeis' unrelenting skeptic to proffer an apologia in favor of a new "phantom gunman" theory.

Says Prof. Cohen, however: "I don't feel at all discredited. I honestly believe that I followed the facts where they led. Up until this most recent development, I and the Warren Commission were right on target. I still uphold that it wasn't a large-scale conspiracy, just one additional sniper who fired a shot that hit nothing and no one."

Jerry Cohen has written a book on the subject entitled *Conspiracy Fever*, which will be in print shortly. "I have no qualms about it coming out," he states, "for although I've revised my opinions somewhat, the book still involves the notions of hysteria and fantasy surrounding conspiracy, and they haven't changed."

"There is a great deal of discussion going on now," notes Prof. Cohen, "over the authenticity of this newest evidence, and the unanswered questions as to why it has been concealed all this time. The scholarly concern about the John F. Kennedy assassination is starting all over, and you can bet I'll be right there in the forefront again."

In the meantime, Prof. Cohen, a talented tenor in his off hours, is writing, and thinking, and enjoying his teaching at Brandeis more than ever—including his popular course on "The Idea of Conspiracy in American Culture."

Ever since his arrival at Brandeis in the fall of 1960, students have poured into his classes, semester after semester, eager to sample his dynamic lecturing and to debate his hardnosed opinions on any and all aspects of American life.

One Brandeis senior, currently enrolled in Prof. Cohen's introductory American studies course, "Problems in American Civilization,"

says of the witty and controversial professor: "I've known since freshman year that I would eventually take a course with Jerry. It's just something I had to do. Everyone said so. And now that I've taken it, I understand why."

"It's Jerry Cohen's style that's so appealing. His classes are alive, as if you can feel learning happen. He says what he thinks, he makes you want to listen; and if you should happen not to agree with him he welcomes your rebuttal."

He also teaches a number of other topical courses, including "Violence in American Life" and one offered for the first time this semester, "The Sixties: Continuity and Change in American Culture."

"I taught in the sixties," says Prof. Cohen, "and admittedly it was an exciting time to be a part of the college scene. But it distresses me to think that the students of the seventies are still living in the shadow of the sixties. There is an emptiness, today, as if students have no feeling of their own experiences."

"But it's just not so. It's a better time on campus these days, and there's better learning going on. Students are more serious about their work and less obsessed with the distractions of the time."

He smiles earnestly as he praises the current generation of college students. "Things are beginning to feel like the early sixties again," he adds, "the way they were before things really got crazy."

Prof. Cohen conjectures that the eighties will see the dawn of a "sensible sixties." "The Cold War seems to be heating up again, and there's a hard-line, anti-Communist stance growing that's reminiscent of the Kennedy-Nixon election years. I hear whispers of the revival of a civil rights movement, and substantive issues like energy and divestment are beginning to surface."

Students will play a major role in rousing the American people if Jerry Cohen is correct. "I'm not a worshipper of students," he claims, "but I don't hate them, either, and I honestly feel that often, in their naivete, and in their pure and simple idealism, they have something to teach."

Jerry Cohen is, at least by appearance, the epitome of the idea of the American "myth" that he discusses in his American Studies courses. He has found his calling and reflects the image of a man who loves what he's doing and is proficient at it.

BRANDEIS BULLETIN MAY 1979