

Growing Doubts about Dallas

By Carl Oglesby

The media reacted with disbelief last year when the House Select Committee on Assassinations published its conclusion that John Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, seventeen years ago this month, was "probably" the work of a sophisticated conspiracy animated by organized crime.

Of some two score major news dailies that commented editorially on this finding, only one, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, was sympathetic. The rest followed the *New York Times* in complaining that the conspiracy conclusion had not been reached scientifically.

The committee based its conclusion on the high-tech analysis of a crucial piece of material evidence that had slipped through the fingers of the Warren Commission. This was a recording of the gunfire in Dealey Plaza made at a receiver in Dallas police headquarters through a microphone accidentally left open on a motorcycle in the motorcade. Analysis of this acoustics evidence by two independent sets of experts (one of them Cambridge's Bolt Beranek and Newman, which also analyzed the Nixon tapes) showed that four shots were fired, not three (as the Warren Commission thought); that the first, second, and fourth were fired from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository building behind the president; and that the third was fired from a point on the grassy knoll in front of him.

To the House committee's mind, two widely separated points of simultaneous gunfire implied two gunmen, and two gunmen implied a conspiracy. But the *New York Times* rejected this reasoning. "To the lay public," the *Times* editorialized, "the word [conspiracy] is freighted with dark connotations of malevolence perpetrated by enemies, foreign or political. But 'two maniacs instead of one' might be more like it." Shortly thereafter, *Times* senior editor Tom Wicker, who drafted the above unsigned editorial, had the cheek to write a negative introduction to the *Times'* own rush edition of the committee's final report without having the opportunity to read it. In this introduction, Wicker acknowledged that his skepticism was "possibly a stubborn refusal to face facts," but insisted that he did not find the acoustics evidence "compelling."



Carlos Marcello: Key conspiracy suspect.

Two new books on the J.F.K. assassination have critics rethinking the case for a conspiracy.

About a year later, on a chilly, drizzly night in New York last June, Wicker was briefly confronted on these opinions by novelist Norman Mailer, long a friend of the case, and British author-investigator Anthony Summers, whose J.F.K.-assassination study, *Conspiracy*, was just being brought out by McGraw-Hill. The occasion was a gathering of about forty New York media people at the swank Central Park West apartment of Jean Stein, a friend of Mailer's and his hostess for a series of evenings, of which this was the first, featuring authors of interesting new books and aiming (as Mailer put it) "to keep up the general level of culture." Mailer had asked me to come because he knew of my special interest in the J.F.K. case.

Over in one corner was hard-edge novelist Elizabeth Hardwick. Over in another, Robert Silvers, editor of the *New York Review of Books*. In another, Tom Wicker himself, with his wife, Pamela Hill, vice-

president of ABC News Documentary. And in another corner, G. Robert Blakey, the balding, fortyish Notre Dame law professor who was chief counsel to the House committee and thus the main architect of its finding that the president was probably killed by organized crime.

We crowded into the library and Mailer got the thing going. He was brief in his introduction of Summers, sober and intense in the few words he said about the J.F.K. issue. Speaking in his usual quiet staccato bursts, with short jabbing arm movements, Mailer said, "One recognizes that the Kennedy assassination may seem by this time to have the character of a national obsession. But the walling over of obsessions is a mark of old age and apathy in the individual personality, and it may be so in the life of the nation as well. In view of what Blakey's committee and Summers's book are teaching us about the assassination in Dallas, one must wonder if our media have served us courageously in this respect."

Given that it was a media house, the question had a good hang time. Could the real question of the Kennedy assassination be one of courage or cowardice

within the media elite? Mailer turned things over to the night's guest author.

Summers is a short, thickset Londoner in his mid thirties with woolly hair and a tough-guy face. He worked his way to his chair before an elegant little writing table and spread out two pages of notes, which he promptly forgot about. He at once took up Mailer's media theme.

"I came to the Kennedy case," Summers began, "as a BBC television journalist with many connections in the U.S. media. I expected to find that the case had been pored over by professional journalists. I found instead, to my astonishment, that there was a veritable reporting vacuum on the Kennedy case. My book went to press with a hundred pages of sources containing only a handful of references to the work of American reporters. It was not for lack of looking."

Summers mentioned no names but homed in on Wicker. When the House published its probable-conspiracy finding, Summers said, "the American press reacted true to bad form. One newspaper even ran an editorial suggesting blithely that perhaps two lone nuts were at work in the same moment within a hundred yards of each other.

"Particularly offensive," Summers said, his voice stronger, "was the foreword written by a *New York Times* editor to the Bantam edition of the final report. This foreword was generally negative and critical, even though it was written before the author could even have seen the final report, much less have read and digested it. This journalist simply announced, without giving his reasons, that the acoustics evidence did not convince him, as though that were the only or the most interesting evidence behind the committee's conclusion."

Summers went on to outline the key points of his book then opened the floor for discussion. It was hard not to wonder what Wicker was thinking. He knew these barbs were for him, and so did many of the people in the room. But he seemed disinclined to pick up the gauntlet. So I heard myself saying, "The *New York Times* editor who has been referred to several times this evening, though not by name, happens to be present. Would he care to respond?"

The room stiffened. There was a brief pause. Then lanky Wicker stirred where he sat on the floor against the wall at the farther side of the room, dressed in jeans and a tweed jacket. He leaned forward and in his deep southern gentleman's voice said a touch defensively that whether he was right or wrong—"and I could be wrong"—the fact remained that he did not like the acoustics evidence. He thought it was inadequate grounds for the committee's claim to have proved a conspiracy "scientifically."

Summers could not keep an edge off his voice. "I can't believe the *New York Times* editor really looked at the acous-

tics evidence. I think he was afraid of finding a conspiracy."

Would there now be a little scuffle? Mailer was standing at the mantle behind Summers and now he stepped forward again. Addressing Wicker directly, but first assuring him that he had always respected him and admired his work, Mailer said shortly, "I wonder what you think now about the conspiracy. I get the feeling you think a lot of things would be lost if you crossed the line to conspiracy."

Wicker cleared his throat, considered his words, and spoke a bit sternly, seeming to sense the rebuke implicit in Mailer's gently worded question.

"There's a lot of disquieting information in Summers's book and the committee's report," Wicker said, "but I think it's wrong to claim that conspiracy has been scientifically proved."

Summers answered quickly, "I'd have felt better about your editorial if you'd said that, as well as knocking the acoustics evidence."

Wicker chose not to answer. Mailer did not prod him further. The little confrontation subsided. But the fact that Wicker had been even so briefly challenged on the J.F.K. question by a peer before peers—put on the defensive about a question he is much more used to treating with disdain, if not contempt—this was something new. One could not fail to hear in the subtext of that brief encounter the creaking of deep foundations.

Another sign of this intellectual sea change came later that evening, when Elizabeth Hardwick told me that she had been turned around by Summers's book and that for the first time she now believed that a conspiracy must have been afoot at Dallas. She said *New York Review* editor Robert Silvers had sent the book out to Queens College political scientist Andrew Hacker, a regular contributor to the *Review's* pages. Hacker's piece, Hardwick said, would be appearing soon, and it was "highly favorable to Mr. Summers."

The New York Review of Books, mind, that highly influential organ of liberal opinion, had long ignored the whole conspiracy question, except to disparage those who raised it, as though there were something shabby about the mind that could so preoccupy itself with the lurid details of J.F.K.'s death, something malformed about the intelligence that could hypothesize the existence of sophisticated criminal conspiracies. This has been the attitude of the media at large, and until last summer, it was all but monolithically the attitude of the liberal press.

Then came Hacker's review of Summers's *Conspiracy*. Hacker began by noting the difficulty intellectuals have had with the conspiracy question, summarized the elements of Summers's argument, passed approving judgment on his reasoning, and laid down a conclusion as new for him as for the pages of the *New*

York Review: "We may never know who fired the fatal bullets," he wrote, "but we are closing in on why the deed was done. It is not a case at rest."

Hacker's voice was not alone. Many of the same newspapers—like the *Atlanta Constitution* and the *Los Angeles Times*—that had gagged editorially on the closely reasoned, cautiously worded final report of the congressional committee a year before were now printing sympathetic reviews of a book that actually went much further in its conspiracy claims. Even the conservative *Business Week* joined the great spinning. What had "seemed the province of cranks and self-seekers" was now changed by Summers's work into a legitimate issue. "From now on," said *Business Week*, "the question of conspiracy must be taken seriously."

This question turns out not to hinge so exclusively on the sensational acoustics evidence as may have first appeared. Summers's thesis in *Conspiracy*, in fact, is that regardless of the grassy-knoll shot, Oswald was probably not even in the same room when his rifle was fired at the president by somebody else. The conspiracy that framed Oswald for the crime, suggests Summers, was probably formed of three institutional components, each with its own motive.

First, a "renegade element" within the CIA, connected with the "fiasco" of the invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 and furious with Kennedy for what they considered his treachery.

Second, Cuban exiles, Bay of Pigs vets and others, convinced that Kennedy had betrayed them.

Third, mobsters linked with the CIA and Cuban exile anti-Castro operations through their immense stake in prerevolutionary Cuba (Castro had closed their casinos and kicked them out), and particularly angry with the Kennedy administration because of its all-out campaign to destroy organized crime in America—the first and last time there has ever been such a thing.

These forces, thinks Summers, joined hands to kill the president, specifically isolating Oswald as the patsy and going to great lengths to plant false clues that would seem to prove his guilt.

But another and even more important book on the assassination, due out this month from Times Books, presents a substantially different and perhaps more convincing theory of the Dallas conspiracy. Called *The Plot to Kill the President*, this is chief counsel G. Robert Blakey's own account (co-authored with his chief editor on the assassinations committee, Richard Billings) of the committee's two-year investigation and what it proved.

Unlike Summers, Blakey is convinced that Oswald fired all the shots that hit the president, and that he did so much in the manner determined by the Warren Commission: a first shot that went wild, a second that hit both the president and Gov-

onor John Connally, and a third that struck the president's head and was clearly fatal. However, Blakey believes the acoustics evidence proves that another shot was fired, just before Oswald's last shot, this one by a second gunman situated on the grassy knoll. Blakey says this shot missed.

Who this second gunman might have been, Blakey thinks, is forever lost. "That guy's been at the bottom of Lake Pontchartrain for seventeen years," he told me recently. But as for Oswald, Blakey thinks we can establish much: first, that he was genuine defector to the Soviet Union, not a U.S. spy on a mission; second, that he had real left-wing sympathies; third, that he was possibly recruited by Soviet intelligence and was in any case of great interest to the KGB.

Blakey goes much further than any previous writer in making a case that Oswald was the KGB's man when he shot the president. As Blakey told me, "Here's Tony Summers getting all uptight about a possible sighting of Oswald with a possible CIA agent, but we've got a perfect sighting of Oswald with a KGB assassin supervisor within a month of the assassination! Okay? You take Oswald with his demonstrable left-wing politics, you put him in the presence of a KGB assassin, and the next month he kills the president. That's a hell of a case!"

But even though he knows that "the KGB has been assassinating people around the world since the 1940s when they were the *Cheka*" and believes the Soviet regime morally capable of assassinating the president, Blakey comes out thinking the Soviets were not the guilty party. Oswald's Soviet ties were relevant to the conspiracy scenario, he thinks, only in that they helped make him the perfect fall guy.

Similarly, Blakey takes up the possibility that Cuba ordered Kennedy's death. Here again he makes what he calls "a powerful case for the view that Castro did it," but finally rejects that theory, proceeding to the notion that the anti-Castro Cuban exiles may have been responsible. "This gets very complicated," Blakey says. "It is not entirely distinguishable from the question of whether organized crime did it, so it's a natural bridge to the chapters on organized crime."

Blakey chuckles that "one of the problems with this case is that it sometimes seems like the novel *Murder on the Orient Express*, where all the suspects come by and stab the victim." Nevertheless, he reaches and defends a strong conclusion in this book. As his subtitle says, "Organized Crime Assassinated J.F.K. The Definitive Story." The CIA, he thinks, played no role. "The problem I have with Tony's book," he said, "is that his perspective is slightly left of center. As a European intellectual, his preferences were to find a CIA involvement. And even if a few CIA people were corrupted, that only

raises the question of who corrupted them."

The most likely candidate for mastermind and driving force of the Kennedy assassination, Blakey believes, is New Orleans crime lord Carlos Marcello, now close to eighty and still fighting deportation proceedings instituted against him by Robert Kennedy in 1961. Possibly acting in league with his Miami Mafia counterpart, Santos Trafficante, also an old man now and Jimmy Hoffa, Marcello "had the motive, the means, and the opportunity," according to Blakey, to kill the president.

The evidence that necessitates a mob-conspiracy theory of the crime, says Blakey, concerns Oswald's killer, Jack Ruby. Ruby's ties to organized crime, which the Warren Commission denied, turn out to be extensive, including specific ties to the Marcello and Trafficante families and killers associated with Hoffa. ("Did you know," says Blakey in a wonder-filled voice, "that Ruby was with the number-two guy in the Dallas mob the night before the assassination?") And Blakey believes he has proved that Ruby was stalking Oswald for two days before he got close enough to kill him. "Jack Ruby silenced Oswald on behalf of the mob," he says flatly, "and that is the heart of the matter. Even if the acoustics evidence had turned out to be a dud, the evidence on Jack Ruby still proves an organized-crime conspiracy."

Blakey concedes that *The Plot to Kill the President* demonstrates this proposition only at what he calls "the level of historical truth." As a careful lawyer, he knows that his case is not yet ready for court. "But give me twenty FBI agents and a dozen good Justice Department attorneys," he says excitedly, "and I could get indictments in six months."

Though Blakey is discontented with foot dragging in the Justice Department since the assassinations committee turned its final report over to the attorney general a year and a half ago, he is confident that the case will sooner or later get the judicial attention it demands. "Our society has a difficult time dealing with sophisticated conspiracies," he says, "but notice that the motto of our book is the line from Chaucer, 'Murder will out.'"

By the time this column appears, further delays not intervening, the Justice Department will have announced steps to verify the acoustics evidence, which still looms large in the conspiracy argument because it is so simple to grasp and, as far as it goes, so conclusive, not necessarily because it is the strongest or most revealing evidence. To distance the government from the process as well as to secure credible finality in the results, the Justice Department has arranged to fund, through the National Science Foundation, a panel of Nobel-laureate scientists selected by the National Academy of Sciences. This panel will do only one thing: evaluate the scientific procedures employed in the

committee's analysis of the acoustics evidence. If the finding is inconclusive, the panel will draw up new tests and carry them out. If the panel blows the committee's analysis out of the water, the matter will probably be put back to rest, *pace* the Summerses and the Blakeys and the Ruby evidence. If, on the other hand, as Blakey anticipates, the panel confirms the science of the two-gunman finding, then a real investigation may begin.

Of course, Blakey is annoyed that all the effort is being concentrated on the acoustics evidence. "We did it twice," he insists, "with two independent scientific groups applying different technological approaches, and it came out both times. How long do we keep pretending not to know there's a crime to be solved?" Meanwhile, Marcello, Trafficante, and the live leads Summers and Blakey say are there to be followed up are going untouched, the principals growing older.

The delay also creates subtler problems. One of the great achievements of the House select committee's work was to rescue the case from the "cranks and self-seekers" *Business Week* complained about. But as time goes by and the government continues to procrastinate, the bad money comes back into circulation. A perfect case in point is British author Michael Eddowes's efforts to exhume Oswald's body from its Fort Worth grave. His argument for doing this is that discrepancies between Marine and autopsy records indicate that someone other than Oswald may be buried in Oswald's grave. Snapped a former senior member of the House committee's investigative staff, "The issue is not Oswald and never has been. The issue is who is controlling the people who fired the shots, whoever they were, whatever their names. And that is not going to be settled by measuring a seventeen-year-old skeleton. They'll dig him up and announce that it's Oswald's body, after all, and we should all go back to sleep again."

But if its seventeenth anniversary finds the J.F.K. case moving along at a lot less than top speed, still it is moving along discernibly. The world has new information, richer theories of the crime, new books with new levels of seriousness and detail, and in the immediate offing, new official steps.

Just as important, the media may be preparing to enter the lists for the first time in a positive way: to understand at long last that the question of a J.F.K. conspiracy is forced upon our attention by the facts and the importance of the case, not by cranks or ghouls. If and when that understanding takes root and the media get nearly as cranked up about J.F.K. as it was about Watergate, there's nothing to keep us from establishing the final truth in this matter, bringing a few conspirators to justice, and coming to more realistic terms with our recent political history. □