THE LIFE OF KENNEDY'S DEATH

by Christopher Lasch

How the mythology of JFK's assassination sustains the mythology of his career.

AFTER twenty years, the murder of John F. Kennedy still haunts the American soul. It has become a symbol of the country's thwarted promise, of former greatness overthrown, of the American dream in decline. No other president since Franklin Roosevelt has embodied so fully the promise of national excellence, to use a favorite Kennedy phrase. No other postwar president has inspired so many people with such hope, whether or not it was justified; and none seems likely to do so in the near future. Even Kennedy's critics have to admit that things haven't been the same since he died.

The sense that Kennedy's assassination marked a sharp rupture in our history has strengthened over time. His murder plunged the country into a time of troubles, or at least coincided, more or less, with the beginnings of a turbulent era. The United States has had a long history of political assassinations; but it is only in the last generation that assassinations have come to serve as one more piece of evidence—interpreted in conformity with already existing beliefs about history and politics—that things are falling apart. For liberals, in particular, Kennedy's death marks the end of a period in which liberals controlled both parties, commanded widespread popular support, and managed both foreign policy and the "mixed economy" with apparent success. After 1963, liberals split over Vietnam and lost much of their following. Black militants and student radicals denounced them as racists and imperialists, while the white working class condemned their permissive attitude to crime and abortion.

Because it has never received a satisfactory explanation, Kennedy's death has invited something of the same kind of speculation that once surrounded his brief term in office, the "incalculable and now unfulfilled promise" of his presidency, as historian Arthur Schlesinger called it in his tribute to the fallen hero.

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Until recently, at least, it has been possible to see in Kennedy's death, as in his life, pretty much whatever an observer wanted to see. Both present a rich field for the unchecked play of fantasy. Hence the enormous variety and popularity of conspiracy theories. Hence the official interpretations, equally fantastic in their own way, about the "climate of hate" that produced a lonely psychopath like Lee Harvey Oswald. Hence also the myth of the Kennedy administration as Camelot, which flourished not only because a great many liberals needed it, but also because the facts of Kennedy's tenure in office were for a long time almost as sparse and inconclusive as the facts surrounding his assassination.

For a large and influential class of intellectuals, publicists, and administrators, the closely linked mysteries of Kennedy's death and his "unfulfilled" presidency supported each other and served the same purpose. They helped, for a time at least, to sustain the country's illusions about itself, which had been vested to a remarkable degree in the person of the murdered president. Kennedy stood for everything liberals wanted to believe about themselves. He stood for national greatness, imperial destiny, and the new cultural and political maturity deemed appropriate to America's preeminence in world affairs. He stood for toughness tempered with prudence, intellect unpalsied by Stevensonian scruples, wit without self-deprecation, glamour without vulgarity.

Seeking to explain their loss, liberals glorified Kennedy in retrospect as a modern King Arthur, done in by the passions and resentments of lesser mortals. The social mythology of the assassination made Kennedy's death a tragic but entirely fitting end to a life that elevated him above ordinary men. Among liberals, the eagerness to believe the official version of Kennedy's death, widely admitted even

by many of its partisans to be something less than conclusive, becomes intelligible only as another expression of the need to believe the official version of his life. The Kennedy myth required that both retain an element of mystery. To look too deeply into Kennedy's death meant looking too deeply into his life.

THE ORIGINS of the official interpretation of the assassination lay not in the events of November 22, 1963, in Dallas, but in the intellectual climate of the late 1950s. Unlike Lincoln, with whom he was repeatedly and inappropriately compared in the days following his assassination, Kennedy achieved legendary status even before reaching the White House, and not because his public record compelled inordinate admiration. Rather, the academic establishment, journalists, and opinion makers had decreed that the country needed a hero.

Never was a political myth so consciously and deliberately created or so assiduously promoted, in this case by the very people who had deplored Madison Avenue's participation in President Eisenhower's campaigns. As Norman Mailer wrote in his account of the 1960 Democratic convention, which helped to fix Kennedy's public image as an "existential hero," the "life of politics and the life of myth had diverged too far" during the dull years of Eisenhower and Truman. It was Kennedy's destiny, Mailer thought (along with many others), to restore a heroic dimension to American politics, to speak to and represent the "real subterranean life of America," to "engage" once again the "myth of the nation," and thus to bring a new "impetus . . . to the lives and to the imaginations of the American."

Arthur Schlesinger, who played an important part in converting Stevenson supporters to Kennedy in 1960, joined Mailer in hammering home the point that the times demanded a hero. In "The Decline of Greatness," an essay written in 1958, Schlesinger regretted the lack of "towering personalities" in postwar politics and looked to heroism as the remedy for conformity, blandness, and the "cult of the group." "A bland society will never be creative." Insisting that democracy should not be confused with the deification of the common man, Schlesinger attributed the popular fear of heroes to "envy" and "rancor." He contended that the "common man has always regarded the great man with . . . resentment as well as admiration," because "great men make small men aware of their smallness." Thus Schlesinger anticipated the alleged motive of Kennedy's assassin by five years. It was as if he had invented Oswald in advance.

Two years later, Schlesinger urged a "reconstruction of democratic theory," which embodied an unfortunate prejudice against strong leaders, and a new recognition of the need for "heroic leadership" in democratic societies. "The classical democratic ideology nourishes us all; but, maintained in rigid purity, it has been an abundant source of trouble." Many other liberals in the Fifties were similarly engaged in a reexamination of their commitment to democratic ideology. McCarthyism had left liberals with an acute fear of the "anti-intellectualism" allegedly rampant among the American people, which underlay not only McCarthyism, according to liberal historians, political scientists, and sociologists, but the whole tradition of American populism.

The "paranoid style," as historian Richard Hofstadter called it, reflected the status anxieties of half-educated, alienated, resentful provincials raised in a climate of religious fundamentalism, racial and ethnic bigotry, and naïve political myths about the virtue of the common people. It was not surprising that Hofstadter's work, in particular, was later cited so often by defenders of the Warren Report, in an attempt both to characterize the "climate of hate" that led to the murder of President Kennedy and to disparage the people's belief in conspiratorial explanations of how it happened. More than any other social scientist, Hofstadter popularized the dominant themes of academic social science, brought them to the study of American history and politics, and taught people to pay attention to the psycho-sociological basis of politics. His debunking studies of populism, his attempt to link McCarthyism to the populist tradition, his work on anti-intellectualism and the paranoid style reinforced the theory, held by so many liberal intellectuals, that democracy works best when educated elites provide a buffer between popular irrationality and the state.

All this helped to prepare an atmosphere conducive to the glamorization of Kennedy as the man destined to save America from conformity, anti-intellectualism, mediocrity, and mythlessness. During Kennedy's brief tenure in office, the need for a myth of heroic leadership, together with a misplaced understanding of their duties, led *Newsweek* (according to its then editor Ben Bradlee's later account) to adjust its coverage of events in order to enhance Kennedy's image and *The New York Times* to suppress advance knowledge of the Bay of Pigs invasion.

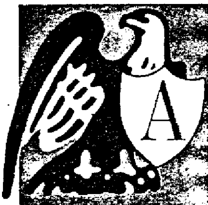
Since the illusion of Kennedy's heroic stature rested on images rather than substance—Schlesinger's case for Kennedy over Nixon in 1960 relying heavily on the argument that "Nixon lacks taste"—the illusion could be sustained, in the face of his inconclusive, often disappointing record as president, only by retrospective commentary that dwelled on the unfulfilled promise of a career brought prematurely to a tragic close. The assassination brought the legend of Camelot to full flower and thus kept alive—for a time at least—the illusions of national greatness embodied in Kennedy, to which he himself had appealed on so many occasions.

Martyrdom enhanced Kennedy's reputation, in the short run, as it had enhanced Lincoln's, saving him from probable defeats and compromises in the imperfect, contingent realm of everyday politics. In Lincoln's case, however, a solid core of political achievements already underlay the legend later imposed on them and would be rediscovered by historians and biographers when they managed to get behind the legend. A suspicion that Kennedy's career could not withstand similar scrutiny announced itself almost at once and colored much of the public commentary following his death.

Two themes, accordingly, emerged at once in the postassassination commentary offered by the national media: celebration of Kennedy's "style," at the expense of his actual achievements, and speculation about the dark undercurrents in American life, the unsuspected flaws in the national character, that had led to his murder.

According to *Newsweek*, Kennedy "infused [the presidential] office with a youthful, direct, and vigorous style unmatched since the days of Theodore Roosevelt." "The key was style," wrote Bradlee. "His style captured the nation's imagination.... With his gifts of intellect, purpose, and charm, and his high hopes of winning a second term, what great and lasting accomplishments might he have forged?" Theodore H. White praised Kennedy's, "remarkable, astringent candor," his "gaiety, elegance, grace." While historians would argue about Kennedy's legislative record, "no man in Washington who knew John F. Kennedy well thinks that his style soon will be matched."

Schlesinger's eulogy in the *Saturday Evening Post* went even further in celebrating Kennedy's "vitality of personality," his "quick intelligence, easy charm, and laconic wit," his "historical imagination," his "vision of America . . . as a noble nation, rising above mean and ugly motives." Kennedy gave the nation a "new sense of itself," according to Schlesinger, "a new spirit, a new style, a new conception of its role and destiny." Not to be outdone, White published an interview with Jacqueline Kennedy, two weeks after the assassination, in which she recalled her husband's boyhood love of historical romance. "For Jack, history was full of heroes." White's interview closed with the words from the Broadway musical, as quoted by Mrs. Kennedy: "For one brief shining moment there was Camelot."



A HERO defined so largely by his style required an appropriate antithesis, and Kennedy's eulogists found one made to order in the person of Lee Harvey Oswald. A misfit, a nobody, a pathetic mouse of a man, Oswald had precisely the right qualities for the role history had evidently assigned him. A kind of satisfaction crept into accounts of his role as Kennedy's nemesis. "So hate triumphed," wrote Ralph McGill with a suggestion of its inevitability, at the end of an article deploring political "extremism." Schlesinger closed his postassassination tribute to Kennedy on a similar note. Kennedy had been the "most civilized President we have had since Jefferson," Schlesinger wrote. "And so a crazed political fanatic shot him down."

Kennedy's admirers, themselves fascinated by the "majesty and burdens of the Presidency," as *Newsweek* put it, attributed the same fascination to Kennedy's assassin. Like the assassins of Garfield, Lincoln, and McKinley, Oswald was a "lonely psychopath," according to *Time*, seeking an "hour of mad glory." The prototype of the little man in his loser's envy and resentment of the Kennedy glamour, Oswald revived intellectuals' doubts about the common man's ability to rise to the challenge of great leadership. Those who admired Kennedy for his aristocratic bearing and his aristocratic disdain for conventional political gestures found in Oswald a perfect outlet for their fear of the mass mind.

Ben H. Bagdikian's portrait of "the assassin," published in the *Saturday Evening Post* only two weeks after the fatal shooting in Dallas, set the tone for much of the commentary that was to follow. "In what dark, hidden corner of the mind grew Lee Oswald's mysterious compulsion to shoot a man he didn't even know?" The mystery lay not in the question of Oswald's guilt, which at that point the national media took for granted, but in the depths of his mind and in the social pathology that had allegedly produced him. For all their talk of Oswald's loneliness and isolation and of the madness of his crime, most commentators needed to picture him, like his noble victim, as a representative man. Oswald represented—such was the official consensus—the worst in American life, just as Kennedy represented the best and brightest.

In the liberal press and in the national news media as a whole, speculation about the assassination thus came to hinge not on the question of whether Oswald murdered Kennedy unassisted—a question left for the most part, in the Sixties, to "cranks" and "conspiracy-mongers"—but on the seemingly much larger, momentous question of what his action revealed about the national psyche. The question so often raised in the hours following the assassination—"What have we come to?"—prompted an orgy of national soul-searching that lasted into the late Sixties and early Seventies. Conducted for the most part in the sociological and psychiatric mode, this pseudo-introspection did not address the still unanswered questions about the number and location of the shots that killed the president, the nature of his wounds, or the specific circumstances that might have led to the shooting. Instead it addressed the pseudoquestion, unanswerable even if one accepted its dubious premise that Oswald acted alone, of the social meaning of his crime.

It was not long, however, before people began to raise doubts about the official version of Kennedy's murder. It was not clear how Oswald, a mediocre marksman by all accounts, could have fired with such deadly accuracy. Many eyewitnesses claimed to have heard shots from the grassy knoll to the right of the presidential motorcade. The doctors at Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas initially described the wound in Kennedy's throat as an entry wound. Any number of other questions remained unanswered, in spite of the quick consensus among national media that Oswald had acted alone. Harrison Salisbury later claimed that the *Times* had tracked down every lead that implicated others besides Oswald, only to find that they arose from rumors circulated by "overworked, excited reporters or by minor officials suddenly cast into the national spotlight and inadequately prepared . . . to present a sober and unprejudiced record." What Salisbury's account really shows is that the *Times*, like other national media, assumed Oswald's guilt within forty-eight hours of the shooting and devoted most of its attention to the "credibility of [his] motivation." Even so, the general public remained stubbornly unconvinced by the official version of events.

On November 28, 1963, President Johnson set up the Warren Commission, with the deliberate intention of putting an end to public speculation about the events in Dallas. He told Earl Warren that unless doubts were laid to rest, the United States might be forced into a nuclear war. According to Melvin Eisenberg, a member of the commission's legal staff, Warren too "placed emphasis . . . on quenching rumors, and precluding further speculation . . ."

Instead of allaying suspicions, the Warren Report, issued in September 1964, raised them to a new level of intensity. Faced with new evidence against the theory of a single assassin—the Zapruder film, which proved that Oswald's rifle could not have fired so many shots in such rapid succession—the Warren Commission had to argue that a single bullet had passed through both President Kennedy and Governor John Connally, inflicting seven different wounds and damaging two bones in the course of its flight, and nevertheless emerged almost intact. It had to argue that the bullet entered Kennedy's neck, whereas photographs of the president's shirt, reports of eyewitnesses present at the autopsy performed at Bethesda Naval Hospital, and the Zapruder film all indicated that the bullet had entered Kennedy's back.

The commission had to minimize or ignore an abundance of other evidence that cast doubt on the single-assassin theory. The working papers of the Warren Commission, released many years later, prove what many people suspected at the time, that the commission arrived at its conclusions before conducting its investigation.

With its obvious inadequacies, the Warren Report gave new encouragement to conspiracy theories. By December 1966, *Esquire* could publish a "Primer of Assassination Theories" listing thirty versions of Kennedy's murder, almost all of them at odds with the official version. Books questioning the Warren Report included Edward Jay Epstein's *Inquest*, Richard Popkin's *The Second Oswald*, and Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgment*, all published in 1966. Many more would follow. Even *Life* concluded, on November 25, 1966, that Oswald's acting alone had become a "matter of reasonable doubt."

The liberal establishment never confronted these doubts. Instead it constructed a sociopsychological theory that explained them away as part of the same climate of hatred that killed Kennedy in the first place. It replied to popular speculation about conspiracy with its own kind of speculation about the conspiracy *mentality*, which reached a climax in the report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, issued in October 1969. By this time, the murders of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, a wave of urban riots, and the increasingly violent confrontations between radical students and police had added extra urgency to the demand for sociopsychiatric explanations of the American malaise. The Commission on Violence, appointed by President Johnson in June 1968 and composed of Milton Eisenhower, Rep. Hale Boggs, senators Philip Hart and Roman Hruska, Eric Hoffer, Dr. Walter Menninger, Leon Jaworski, and other notables, held thirty days of hearings, listened to a hundred witnesses, and solicited a number of studies by social scientists. Its report, written by James F. Kirkham, Sheldon G. Levy, and William J. Crotty, showed how completely the events of the Sixties had been assimilated into liberal social mythology, and how deeply the clichés of psychiatry and social science had penetrated into political discourse, deflecting attention from the specific circumstances surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy to the psychiatric and sociological dislocations allegedly underlying the country's tradition of random, apolitical violence.

Like the Warren Report, *Assassination and Political Violence* began by assuming Oswald's guilt and went on to build an elaborate structure of speculation on this shaky premise. In a section on the "psychology of presidential assassins," the authors found a common pattern of familial disruption and alienation, to which Oswald closely conformed: "absence or disruption of the normal family relationship between parent and child," "hostility towards their mother redirected against authority symbols." "Almost all the assassins were loners who had difficulty making friends of either sex, especially in establishing lasting relationships with women"; and Oswald, it appeared, was no exception. Sexual inadequacy helped to heighten the contrast between Oswald and Kennedy, whose exercise of his *droit du seigneur*, already legendary among those in the know, helped to enhance his aristocratic image.

CROSS-CULTURAL comparisons, according to the Commission on Violence, indicated that "traditional" and "modern" societies had low rates of violence, whereas violence flourished in "transitional" societies "awakened to a desire for a new way of life but only beginning to achieve it." Since the United States did not conform to expectations about the civilizing effects of modernization, the commission searched for conditions peculiar to American society and found them in the country's history of racial conflict, in the vigilante tradition, and in the misguided conceptions of individualism and popular sovereignty that helped to sustain it. "The vigilante tradition lives on. It has become a permanent part of [the] American heritage." It received cultural support, allegedly, from such well-established democratic doctrines as freedom of conscience, the right to bear arms, and the right of revolution.

The arguments advanced by the Commission on Violence had the effect of identifying violence with an excess of democracy. Not only did the commission call much of democratic ideology into question, it stressed the "critical importance" of maintaining an "overwhelming sense of the legitimacy of our government and institutions"—the same considerations that so obviously underlay the Warren Report. Both reports placed far more emphasis on legitimacy than on democracy.

The Commission on Violence recognized the need to remove the "root causes of social unrest and perceived injustice," and it disavowed any "shortcut to political tranquillity"; but it also disavowed the possibility that social injustices could be corrected through popular action. It deplored social tensions and "perceived injustice," not injustice itself. It deplored the rise of "two warring camps of white racists and black militants," without addressing the real sources of their legitimate rage. It denounced the "extremism" of Left and Right and pleaded for moderation. By innuendo and implication, it defined populist democracy as the principal threat to "political tranquillity."

Distrust of democracy and of the popular mind, which ran through this entire document, appeared with particular clarity in sections attempting to account for the popularity of conspiratorial explanations of assassinations. Harris polls supported the finding of the Gallup poll that a sizable majority of Americans still believed President Kennedy to have been the victim of a conspiracy. Having accepted the Warren Report—which "demonstrated that in all probability no murder in the history of the United States has been as thoroughly investigated as that of John F. Kennedy"—the Commission on Violence ruled out the most compelling explanation for the prevalence of conspiracy theories: the obvious inadequacy of the official theory. It therefore had to draw once again on social psychology. Relying heavily on a study submitted by Lawrence Z. Freedman, a psychiatrist at the University of Chicago, the authors of the final report argued that presidential assassinations, because of their overtones of patricide, shock people's deepest assumptions about the stability of things and expose the vulnerability of everything they cherish. Conspiracy theories, however misguided, cushion the shock by providing a "more intelligible explanation." "It seems incredible that the man who commands the largest power in the world . . . can be destroyed in seconds by the attack of a nonentity." Instead of admitting that a single "isolated, unstable individual" can threaten the fragile structure of governmental authority, people take refuge in fantasies of conspiracy. Like the Warren Commission, the National Commission on Violence set out to provide comfort and reassurance:

> *We cannot hope to convince those whose own psychic needs require a belief in . . . conspiracies. We can, however, comfort the many who accept the overwhelming weight of evidence of the lone, mentally ill assassin, but who still feel disturbed and uneasy about that evidence. This uneasiness is a product of the primal anxieties created by the archetypal crime of parricide—not the inadequacy of the evidence of the lone assassin.*

Here again, as in so much of the commentary on the assassination of President Kennedy, the emphasis fell on the contrast between the vulnerability of legitimate authority and the violence of popular irrationality and emotionalism, which threatened to undermine the imposing but fragile structure of representative institutions. Popular hatred and irrationality came to the surface, according to social scientists, not only in the action of the deranged assassin himself but in the hardly less deranged response to it: the "psychic need" for conspiracy theories, and the refusal to listen to the seemingly "overwhelming evidence" against them.

THE ASSUMPTIONS underlying the report of the Commission on Violence reappeared even in the writings of observers further removed from the official view of things. Garry Wills and Ovid Demaris advanced a similar explanation of the popular need for conspiracy theories in their book on Jack Ruby, published in 1968. The bullet that killed Kennedy, they argued, evoked a fear of "dangers more disintegrative than any conspiracy could manage." It evoked a "panicky feeling that chaos had broken loose." Drawing on a study of popular reactions to the assassination, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, Wills and Demaris attributed the need for conspiracy theories to the fear of the unknown and the desire to deny the existential horror of Kennedy's death by reducing it to a plot. Horrified by the radical evil embodied in Oswald,

the American people had to get rid of Oswald, "to 'shoot' him with words, talk, theory, proof." Jack Ruby's murder of Oswald vicariously satisfied not only the people's primitive need for retribution but the need to remove the assassin altogether and thus to deny the "obliterative irresponsibility of death."

Even some of those who questioned the Warren Report deplored the popular need for conspiracy theories and the psychological needs behind them: such was the power of the social mythology elaborated by liberal social scientists and historians. In 1968, Edward Jay Epstein published an attack in *The New Yorker* on Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney who claimed to have unraveled a right-wing plot leading to Kennedy's murder. Garrison had no case, as it turned out, but Epstein did not content himself with demonstrating the flimsiness of the evidence assembled by Garrison or his obvious itch for publicity. Epstein insisted that Garrison embodied "what Richard Hofstadter has classified as 'the paranoid style in American politics,' to which 'the feeling of persecution is central,' and which is 'systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy.'" Admitting that Garrison's "paranoid style" did not "of itself rule out the possibility that there is substance to his claims," Epstein nevertheless shifted the burden of proof, in effect, from the government to its critics.

His own analysis of the Warren Report, published two years earlier, had raised serious doubts about the official explanation of Kennedy's death. His denunciation of Garrison, however, had the effect of associating conspiracy theories with "paranoia." By dwelling on Garrison's contradictory statements and his overheated populist rhetoric, Epstein left the impression that no reasonable person could take seriously Garrison's attempt to implicate the CIA in the events leading up to Kennedy's death, his denunciation of the "Eastern Establishment," or his claim that high officials had deliberately "concealed the true facts" about the assassination. According to Epstein, Garrison exploited "popular suspicions about secrecy." Epstein did not say in so many words that such suspicions were completely unfounded, but it was hard to avoid this conclusion, notwithstanding his disclaimer that "paranoia" did not in itself rule out the possibility of a conspiracy.

It was easy, of course, even before Garrison's case collapsed in court, to ridicule his rhetorical exaggerations and his irresponsible, unsubstantiated charges against President Johnson, whose suppression of the truth about Kennedy's murder, according to Garrison, indicated that he too had participated in the plot to kill Kennedy, since he had "gained more than any other human from the assassination." The anti-Johnson version of the conspiracy thesis was the ugliest of the many wild and wishful theories propounded by the Left, in an attempt not merely to explain events unexplained by the Warren Report but to clear Oswald, whose left-wing background embarrassed the Left. Leftist interpretations of the assassination compared Oswald to Dreyfus and made him the victim of a "fascist" plot masterminded by the CIA, the FBI, the military establishment, the international money trust, the China Lobby, Texas oil men, or Johnson himself. *Ramparts* argued that both the CIA and the FBI were "controlled" by the "one man who has profited most from the assassination—your friendly President, Lyndon Johnson!" Left-wing magazines acclaimed Barbara Garson's play *Macbird*, a crude satire that traced the assassination to Johnson. The eagerness to implicate Kennedy's successor suggests that many people on the Left were themselves captivated by the Kennedy cult and shared the Kennedys' contempt for the interloper from Texas, the man without "style." In implicating Johnson, they not only exonerated Oswald but glorified Kennedy as a martyr of the Left, who had been assassinated, according to Garrison, "because he was working for reconciliation with the U.S.S.R. and Castro's Cuba."

THE POPULAR understanding of our recent history, although it too assigns a central place to the Kennedy assassination, diverges sharply from the official understanding. From the beginning, the public had doubts that Oswald acted alone, and these doubts have grown stronger over the years. In December 1963, a Gallup poll found that only 29 percent of those interviewed believed in a single assassin, while 52 percent subscribed to a conspiracy theory and 19 percent understandably expressed uncertainty. Three years later, 37 percent accepted the theory of a single assassin, but 63 percent now thought that others had taken part in the shooting. By 1976, thirteen years after the event, fully 81 percent believed in a conspiracy.

A steady flow of novels and movies based loosely on the assassination, not to mention the endless preoccupation with the Kennedys in publications like the *National Enquirer*, has helped to maintain popular interest in this event and to reinforce conspiracy theories. Books like Richard Condon's *Winter Kills* and films like Alan Pakula's *The Parallax View* have not so much created a belief in conspiracies as fed on beliefs already held. Such works presuppose the plausibility of a conspiratorial explanation of public events. Indeed a conspiratorial view of the world emerges not merely from fictions based directly on the Kennedy assassination but from recent fiction in general, including, notably, the works of Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs, and Kurt Vonnegut. Side by side with the official mythology of a beleaguered government threatened by riots, demonstrations, and unmotivated, irrational assassinations of public figures, a popular mythology has taken shape in the last thirty years that sees government as a

conspiracy against the people themselves.

Here, too, assassinations contribute to the impression that we live in a dangerous, unpredictable world. They appear to fit into a larger pattern of disorder and to confirm fears already established in the public mind. In the popular version, however, the threat to public order comes from above, in the form of high-level plots and conspiracies involving organized crime, intelligence agencies, and politicians at the highest levels of government.

Liberal intellectuals dismiss the conspiratorial view of history as an irrational view held only by naïve, untutored minds. After the Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, and Watergate, however, it is not necessarily naïve to think that high officials often make public policy in secret or that they are quite capable of plotting against the public interest. Nor is it only the uneducated who believe that a high-level conspiracy of some sort might have contributed to the death of President Kennedy and that the government, moreover, has systematically prevented a full investigation of the facts. Gallup polls show that "opinion in the case of the Kennedy assassination is basically the same up and down the socio-economic scale, with not more than one person in seven in any one demographic group holding to the belief Oswald acted alone." The conspiracy theory of Kennedy's death and a conspiratorial view of recent history are popular theories, in the sense that they express distrust of the official view of history, not in the sense that they appeal only to the ignorant and the uneducated. They reflect a widening cleavage between the world view of political elites and the world view of people outside the political establishment. The same gulf between insiders and outsiders, the professional governing classes and laymen, underlies the liberal mythology of civilization threatened from below. The assassination of President Kennedy remains a national obsession, then, because it appears to validate conflicting historical myths.

THE CONSPIRACY theories advanced by the Left, inspired by ideological preconceptions, by a search for right-wing villains, and by venomous hatred for Johnson, helped to discredit the case for conspiracy among people who had doubts about the Warren Report but found the ideas of its critics repellent. The popularity of conspiracy theories on the Right, which blamed Moscow or Havana, helped to identify them even more closely with political extremism. Still, the gaps in the official explanation could not be concealed by the government or lost in the ideological counterattack mounted by its opponents. Defenders of the Warren Report could not explain, without invoking even more implausible explanations, how Oswald managed to shoot twice within seven tenths of a second with a rifle that could not fire two shots in less than 2.25 seconds. Neither the Warren Commission nor subsequent investigations by a panel of pathologists appointed in 1968 by Attorney General Ramsay Clark, by another medical panel appointed in 1975 by Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, or by the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1979 managed to explain how Oswald's rifle could have inflicted the massive wounds on Kennedy's head, which seem to have been caused by exploding bullets fired from a different type of gun. None of these investigations explained how Kennedy's head wounds could have been inflicted by shots fired from behind.

Over the years, the case for a single assassin has grown even weaker than it seemed in the Sixties. New pieces of evidence have been found to be missing, notably the president's brain; while, on the other hand, a new piece of positive evidence, an acoustical tape of the gunshots, made by the Dallas police, proves conclusively, if it is genuine, that shots were fired from in front of the president as well as from the rear. It was largely on the strength of this tape that the Select Committee on Assassinations concluded in its final report that President Kennedy had probably been murdered by a conspiracy.

The most recent and in many ways the most sober and dispassionate study of the assassination, Michael L. Kurtz's *Crime of the Century*, shows that the report of the Select Committee is open to almost as many objections as the Warren Report, the principal conclusions of which it nevertheless challenged. Kurtz's book, however, leaves no question about the inadequacy of the single-assassin theory. It reinforces all the doubts raised in the Sixties and adds many new ones. In view of the overwhelming evidence that Oswald could not have acted alone (if he acted at all), the most remarkable feature of the controversy surrounding the assassination is not the abundance of conspiracy theories but the rejection of a conspiracy theory by the "best and brightest." To this day, many liberals reject the possibility of a conspiracy out of hand. They remain convinced that the "search for conspiracy," as columnist Anthony Lewis once wrote, "only increases the elements of morbidity and paranoia and fantasy in this country. . . . It obscures our necessary understanding, all of us, that in this life there is often tragedy without reason."

Liberals had to interpret Kennedy's assassination as a recrudescence of popular hatred and paranoia. Yet, in retrospect, we can see that official actions, not popular ignorance and irrationality, created the atmosphere of violence and hatred that frightened many in the Sixties and continues to pervade American politics and culture. Even Richard Hofstadter admitted, after lamenting the "growing acceptance of violence" by the public, that the "greatest and most calculating of killers is the national state."

But the evidence linking the state not just to the growth of violence in general but specifically to the

assassination of President Kennedy is much more direct and concrete than this rather abstract formulation would suggest. In 1975, Sen. Frank Church's Select Committee on Intelligence discovered that the CIA had conspired with the Mafia to assassinate Fidel Castro. How much President Kennedy knew about these plots is unclear, but there is no doubt of his admiration for the CIA and its director in charge of covert operations, Richard Bissell. Bissell and other leaders of the intelligence community epitomized the combination of intellectuality and machismo that was the hallmark of the New Frontier. Iconoclastic, witty, scornful of respectable pieties, uninhibited about means, contemptuous of bureaucracy, Bissell and his cohorts "meshed better with the Kennedy men," as former Kennedy aide Harris Wofford notes, "than with their Republican predecessors, who tended to be less sophisticated and more inhibited by middle-class morality." Kennedy entrusted planning for the Bay of Pigs to the CIA instead of the military bureaucracy because "if I need some material fast or an idea fast, CIA is the place I have to go." The Kennedy style, so admired by liberals, included a taste for fast action and an impatience, no less pronounced than Richard Nixon's, with the delays imposed by legal procedures and middle-class political morality.

It also included, of course, a taste for fast women. Church's subcommittee discovered that one of Kennedy's women, Judith Campbell Exner, had conducted a simultaneous affair with Sam Giancana, one of the Mafia leaders approached by the CIA in connection with the plot to kill Castro (even though he was also under investigation by the Justice Department). Wofford argues persuasively that the CIA conspiracy and the Exner connection explain Robert Kennedy's failure to press for a more thorough investigation of his brother's death. Even though he had reason to think that the president might have been killed by agents of Castro, by anti-Castro forces embittered by his failure to support the Bay of Pigs operation with air power, or by members of the Mafia—and the Church committee later found plenty of evidence that all three of these groups talked about the desirability of getting rid of President Kennedy—Robert Kennedy, according to Wofford, knew that he could not get to the "bottom of the assassination without uncovering the very stories he hoped would be hidden forever."

THE FULL TRUTH about the assassination will probably never be known, thanks to the disappearance of so much of the pertinent evidence. The pertinent evidence about Kennedy's presidency, on the other hand, has been known for some time; yet many liberals continue to resist its implications. Thus they have treated the Exner affair as a minor sexual scandal that may shed an unattractive light on Kennedy's private life but leaves his public record untarnished. Liberals, including those self-proclaimed "John F. Kennedy liberals" who are now called neoconservatives, have hardly begun to reckon with the damage Church's disclosures inflicted on Kennedy's reputation, on the myth of the Kennedy family in general, and on everything it represents. Even Wofford, while conceding Kennedy's flaws, presents him as a "tragic hero."

Too many Americans still cling to the legend of Kennedy's unfulfilled promise. What we now know about his life and death suggests that the promise was misconceived to begin with. It was the promise of imperial grandeur and cosmopolitan "style," rooted in a sociopolitical myth that identifies national greatness with the political ascendancy of educated elites and with the triumph of a national cultural and political establishment over popular bigotry and unreason.

The Kennedy cult was promoted by those who had lost faith in the real promise of American life: the hope that a self-governing republic can serve as a source of moral and political inspiration to the rest of the world, not as the center of a new world empire.

The identification of political leadership with the rule of the "best and brightest," the celebration of an "advancing cosmopolitan sentiment" over localism, as Hofstadter put it, and a celebration of "heroic leadership" have no place in the classical theory of democracy.

The generation that prepared the ideological climate for the glorification of the Kennedy "charisma" understood the incompatibility of an imperial style of leadership with the democratic tradition and therefore argued for a revision of that tradition. They dismissed it, in effect, as a political philosophy suitable only for a small, backward, provincial nation.

Today, it is the New Frontier itself that appears backward, provincial, and naïve. Lacking any realistic appreciation of the limits of American power, the New Frontiersmen plunged into reckless experiments in "counterinsurgency" that strengthened the very regimes they were designed to overthrow and made the United States both hateful and contemptible in the eyes of the world. What we now know about the assassination suggests that Kennedy was the victim of bungling interventionism—in this case the misguided attempts to get rid of Castro—encouraged by the dream of imperial greatness and unlimited power.

John F. Kennedy was killed, in all likelihood, not by a sick society or by some supposedly archetypal, resentful common man but by a political conspiracy his own actions may have helped set in motion.

The mythology of his death can no longer prop up the mythology of his life. ■