

# Did Oswald Act Alone?

## We Evaded the Truth Then, And Now It Can't Be Found

By David E. Kaiser

THOSE OLD ENOUGH to remember the assassination of John F. Kennedy will also recall how quickly and easily Americans believed that Lee Harvey Oswald had committed the crime alone. In retrospect, this seems astonishing; it would have been hard to make up a more suspicious assassin than Oswald.

A former Marine, Oswald had defected to the Soviet Union in 1959 and returned in 1962. By 1963 he was a pro-Castro activist; shortly before the murder he had traveled to Mexico to ask Cuban officials for a visa to visit Cuba. Two days after his arrest, he was killed in the Dallas police station by Jack Ruby, a nightclub operator with numerous ties to organized crime.

Nonetheless, a poll taken soon after the assassination showed that four out of five Americans did not believe there had been a conspiracy. In part this reflected the innocent spirit of the early '60s; but the country's failure to investigate possible conspiracies more thoroughly also resulted from the political realities of the time. [Today public attitudes are more skeptical. See Page F2.]

Within hours of the crime, three of the nation's most powerful men — FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, President Lyndon B. Johnson and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy — had concluded that Oswald's background and connections raised questions they did not wish to have answered.

Of the three, Hoover was the first to react. On the afternoon of Nov. 22, 1963, the day of the murder, Dallas FBI agents informed him of the identity of the prime suspect. The news was highly unwelcome. FBI agents, he was told, had suspected both Oswald and his Russian bride, Marina, of involvement with Soviet intelligence since their return to the United States in 1962. Agents in Dallas knew about Oswald's recent trip to Mexico. Worst of all, Oswald had even left a threatening note at the local FBI office after agent James

Hosty interviewed Marina prior to the assassination.

Seldom if ever during J. Edgar Hoover's 40 years in office had he been faced with such embarrassing information. The FBI had failed to prevent a known communist and possible Soviet intelligence agent under bureau surveillance from assassinating the president of the United States.

Privately, Hoover censured 17 FBI officials involved in the case. But within three days — long before any full assessment of Oswald's motives and connections could be made — Hoover completely committed himself to the theory that Oswald had acted alone. This clearly was the least embarrassing theory for the bureau, and having adopted it, Hoover was certain to frown on anything that contradicted it.

On Nov. 26, Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, who agreed that Oswald had probably acted alone, recommended to Johnson's assistant Bill Moyers that the president appoint a special commission to investigate the case. "The public must be satisfied that Oswald was the assassin; that he did not have confederates who are still at large; and that the evidence was such that he would have been convicted at trial," Katzenbach wrote Moyers in a memo.

In early December, Hoover gave the White House a four-volume report concluding that Oswald had acted alone, and the FBI subsequently took the position that nothing remained to be discovered. In February, 1964, when Soviet defector Yuri Nosenko told American authorities that Oswald had never had any connection with Soviet intelligence, Hoover eagerly seized upon his testimony. As author Edward Jay Epstein showed in his 1978 book, "Legend," Hoover insisted on believing Nosenko even after CIA investigators had developed extensive evidence suggesting that Nosenko's defection had been staged to deceive American intelligence.

President Johnson, who appointed the Warren Commission to resolve doubts about the murder, had a particularly potent reason for not wanting the full truth told: He feared it might force him into a disastrous war.

*David Kaiser is an associate professor of history at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh.*

See ASSASSIN, Page F2

## ASSASSIN, From Page F1

From the CIA, the new president probably learned not only about Oswald's Cuban connection, but also about the CIA's own plots against Fidel Castro's life. If it became known that Castro had retaliated through Oswald, it could mean war.

"Wild rumors" must be dispelled, Johnson told Chief Justice Earl Warren, the commission chairman. They could lead the United States "into a war which could cost 40 million lives. . . . If the public became aroused against Castro and Khrushchev, there might be war." The CIA never told the Warren Commission about its plots against Castro's life. Before leaving the White House, Johnson told Howard K. Smith of "ABC" that "Kennedy was trying to get Castro, but Castro got to him first."

Attorney General Robert Kennedy had his own reasons for limiting the investigation. Not only did he know of the CIA's vendetta against Castro, he had helped direct it. A full investigation conceivably might show that he shared the responsibility for his brother's death. And although Kennedy confided suspicions to Arthur Schlesinger that organized crime or Castro might have been behind the shooting, he knew that a full probe of this possibility would reveal the mob's role in CIA assassination plots, and might even stumble upon his dead brother's affair with Judith Campbell, who had been seeing Mafia figures at the same time. Deeply depressed, he remained silent publicly about his suspicions.

Nothing suggests that Hoover, Johnson or Robert Kennedy definitely knew of any broader conspiracy. But the concerns of Hoover and Johnson severely limited the inquiry by the Warren Commission, which was the sole official body charged with the investigation. The commission relied on the FBI and the CIA for most of its investigative field work. Its final report — completed under enormous time pressure — accepted everything tending to confirm the theory of the lone assassin, while ignoring or explaining away contrary evidence.

The Warren Report inevitably became controversial. For 13 years a steady stream of critiques and conspiracy theories found their way into print. In 1976, under the impact of Watergate and recent revelations regarding

CIA activities, the House of Representatives appointed a select committee to investigate the assassinations of President Kennedy and of Martin Luther King Jr.

Two years later, the House committee concluded that although Oswald did kill the president, he had not acted alone. The committee found no evidence definitely identifying any other individual or groups as members of the conspiracy, but stated that anti-Castro or mob figures might have been involved. It rested its conclusion on new acous-

tical evidence that two gunmen had fired at the president.

The evidence came from a tape of radio transmissions between Dallas motorcycle policemen and their dispatcher. The tape included a series of sharp sounds similar to static. In an effort to determine whether these sounds might have been made by the assassin's rifle, the congressional committee turned the recording over to the Cambridge, Mass., firm of Bolt, Beranek and Newman, the same acoustical specialists who had earlier analyzed the 18-minute gap on the White House tapes that were evidence in the impeachment of President Nixon.

Comparing the sounds on the tape to the sounds of gunfire recorded during a reconstruction of the assassination in Dallas's Dealey Plaza, James Barger concluded that the sounds included as many as four gunshots recorded through the open microphone of a police motorcycle about 120 feet behind the presidential limousine. He also estimated a probability of 50 percent that the third impulse, heard less than one second before the fourth, represented a shot not from Oswald's perch in the Texas School Book Depository, but from the so-called grassy knoll in front and to the right of the motorcade.

The significance of Barger's findings increased when photographic evidence revealed the presence of a motorcycle in exactly the position he had predicted. The timing of the four impulses on the tape also coincided with the findings of photographic experts who analyzed films and photographs of the assassination. Two other experts who investigated the third impulse on the tape more thoroughly concluded that the probability that it represented a shot from the grassy knoll was 95 percent. Although the committee concluded that the shot had missed, its findings still undermined the critical conclusion of the Warren Commission: the idea of the lone assassin.

In a 1980 evaluation of the House committee's findings, the FBI argued that the experts had not proven that a shot came from the grassy knoll. The Justice Department decided not to pursue the matter further.

Two years later, a panel of the National Academy of Sciences criticized the FBI's methodology, but also concluded that voices recorded on the tapes proved that the impulses thought to have been shots had occurred more than a minute after the assassination. They also argued that statistical errors had led the committee experts to assign excessive probabilities to their findings. The panel added that further analysis could be done but doubted the results would justify the cost. This controversy has added a layer of ambiguity to a case that hardly needed any more of it.

The tape, however, is far from being the

only evidence that Oswald had confederates. Numerous eyewitnesses — all eventually discounted by the Warren Commission — thought they had heard a shot from the grassy knoll. A Dallas policeman who immediately ran behind the knoll told the Warren Commission that he had accosted a man who produced Secret Service credentials — credentials which must have been fake, since the Secret Service had no man in that location.

A second critical fact concerns the shot Oswald apparently fired in April 1963 at right-wing extremist and retired Army Gen. Edwin Walker. Marina Oswald told the Warren Commission her husband had tried to kill Walker, and a photograph of Walker's house was found among Oswald's effects. A few days before the incident, a friend of Walker's had seen two men looking into Walker's then empty house. A young witness to the actual shooting saw two men drive away in separate vehicles, and Walker himself also saw a vehicle leave the scene. No one has ever identified Oswald's companion or companions.

An equally troubling piece of evidence suggesting a conspiracy was given to the FBI by a Cuban refugee, Silvia Odio, in December 1963. She later told her story to the Warren Commission.

In late September 1963, when Oswald was on his way from New Orleans to Mexico, three men came to her Dallas apartment.

Odio's father was then in prison in Cuba as a result of his attempts to assassinate Castro — attempts assisted by the CIA. Two of the men seemed to be Cubans; the other was an American ex-Marine introduced to her, she said, as Leon Oswald. The two Hispanic men claimed to be friends of her father, and asked for her help in anti-Castro work, but she was noncommittal. The next day one of the men telephoned her and told her that he hoped to get "Leon" into the anti-Castro underground. Leon, he said, was an expert marksman who would "do anything," including killing Castro, and who had stated that Cubans should have shot President Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs.

Silvia Odio said she immediately recognized Oswald when she saw him on television after the murder. The Warren Commission made an extremely unconvincing attempt to discredit her story. But she subsequently convinced authors Edward Jay Epstein and Anthony Summers, as well as the House Committee, that her story is true. Moreover it is confirmed by other witnesses, and by some documentary evidence.

Of the many theories of the assassination that have been advanced, which seem most plausible in light of this evidence?

Ironically, Edward Jay Epstein, one of the first and most acute critics of the Warren Commission's work, has subsequently produced the most convincing "lone assassin"



United Press International

*Officer Bobby Hargis (arrow), who had been riding his motorcycle to the Kennedy car's left and was spattered by the president's blood, looks to the grassy knoll, from which he said shots could have come.*

theory in his book, "Legend." Although Epstein implies that Oswald had been recruited by Soviet intelligence even before his defection to Russia, he does not argue that Oswald was acting on Soviet orders when he shot Kennedy. Instead, his book suggests that Oswald by 1961 had become disillusioned by Soviet communism and, like thousands of young Americans later in the decade, was searching for a new home on the left. Thus he subscribed to both Trotskyite and communist publications, became interested in Castro's revolution, and apparently converted himself to the idea of direct revolutionary action, as shown by his purchase of two guns in early 1963.

Epstein also found witnesses who recalled Oswald making bitter attacks upon Kennedy's imperialist and interventionist policy towards Cuba, and calling Gen. Walker a fascist as dangerous as Adolf Hitler. During the summer of 1963, Epstein argued, Oswald

tried to establish his pro-Castro bona fides in New Orleans by founding his one-man chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee and making several public appearances. In late September he went to Mexico City to try to arrange to travel to Cuba, but the Cuban embassy would not grant him a visa without thoroughly checking his background. Epstein implies that Oswald shot Kennedy in a fit of revolutionary fervor.

An extension of Epstein's theory to cover the evidence for conspiracy would suggest that Oswald could have been assisted by one or two other pro-Castro activists like himself. His visit to Silvia Odio could thus be seen as an attempt to infiltrate an anti-Castro group similar to an attempt he had made earlier in New Orleans. No theory fits all the facts; this one probably fits them as well as any other.

However, it also prompts one to ask whether Lyndon Johnson may have been right. If Oswald killed Kennedy on behalf of the Cuban revolution, could Castro himself have been responsible? The Cuban leader knew about CIA attempts to assassinate him and had recently warned Kennedy through a press correspondent that if such intrigues continued, American leaders would not be immune from retaliation.

On the other hand, Castro was also in the midst of delicate negotiations at the United Nations aiming at normalization of Cuban-American relations. In any case, to have selected Oswald seems on the face of it to have been much too risky. For Castro to have trusted such a shady individual with such a critical mission would have been rash, to say the least. The Cubans strongly suspected that their Mexican embassy was bugged by the CIA, and according to a confidential intelligence source, Oswald actually discussed killing Kennedy when he visited that embassy.

As for the Soviet KGB, its motives for assassinating the American president — now actively working for Soviet-American detente — seem unfathomable.

Another theory, raised from the beginning by leftist critics of the Warren Commission, and argued most thoroughly by Anthony Summers' 1979 book, "Conspiracy," holds that Kennedy was a victim of a right-wing conspiracy involving anti-Castro Cubans and, possibly, elements within the CIA. Anti-Castro activists resented Kennedy's failure to follow up the Bay of Pigs invasion and his October 1962 pledge not to invade Cuba. Perhaps they hoped to provoke an American invasion of Cuba by pinning the assassination on Oswald — exactly the possibility that Johnson feared.

Some evidence to support this theory has surfaced since the Warren Report. Fair Play for Cuba leaflets issued by Oswald in New Orleans in 1963 bore the address 544 Camp St. That address housed the offices of Guy Banister, a former FBI agent active in all manner of extreme right-wing causes and anti-Castro activities. Several witnesses have stated that Banister at least was aware of Oswald's existence, but whether they knew each other is unclear. The Warren Report did not mention Banister, and stated only that it found no evidence that Oswald ever maintained an office at 544 Camp St.

Oswald's meeting with Silvia Odio may also indicate an association with anti-Castro Cubans. An anti-Castro Cuban named Antonio Veciana, who claims a long relationship with the CIA, has stated that he met Oswald in September 1963 in Dallas together with his CIA case officer, a man he knew only as "Maurice Bishop," but this statement remains unconfirmed.

This theory, however, is difficult to reconcile with what we know about Oswald. Given the wealth of evidence that his real sympathies were with the left, it seems more likely that his contacts with right-wing groups were efforts to infiltrate the enemy camp rather than reflections of his own sympathies. Some have therefore argued that Oswald did not really shoot Kennedy at all, but was framed by right-wing elements. However, given that Kennedy was killed by Oswald's rifle — and that Oswald had made a special trip home on the evening of Nov. 21 to pick it up and bring it to work — Oswald seems at the very least a willing participant in a conspiracy to kill the president. From what we know, he needed no inspiration and received no assistance from others to carry out the crime — except for that of the unknown accomplice, if there was one, who may have fired a shot from the grassy knoll. Some anti-Castro Cubans may have welcomed the news of Nov. 22, 1963, but the case against them is far from proven.

G. Robert Blakey, the Notre Dame law professor who served as counsel to the Assassinations Committee and committee staffer

Richard N. Billings argued in their 1981 book, "The Plot to Kill the President," that Kennedy was murdered by organized crime. The mob probably had the most powerful motive for the murder of the president. Attorney General Robert Kennedy had mobilized the full resources of the government to break their power. The murder of the attorney general would have incurred the vengeful wrath of the president, but the murder of the president could and did lead both to the replacement of the attorney general and the end of his aggressive campaign against organized crime.

In fact, illegal surveillance of mob figures in the early 1960s overheard talk of a presidential hit. In the early 1970s, John Roselli, a mobster previously involved in CIA-Mafia assassination plots against Castro, told columnist Jack Anderson that Oswald had been recruited by mobster Santo Trafficante and that another gunman had fired at Kennedy from the front. Roselli was murdered after telling the same story to the Senate Intelligence Committee; his associate Sam Giancana was murdered before he could make a similar appearance. Other witnesses told the Assassinations Committee that both Trafficante and mob boss Carlos Marcello of New Orleans had talked about the possibility of assassinating Kennedy.

Mob figures with whom Oswald associated include his maternal uncle, Charles Murret, and pilot David Ferrie — both residents of New Orleans, where Oswald spent most of the summer of 1963, and both involved with Marcello. Jack Ruby, who shot Oswald in the Dallas police station, had been involved with the mob since childhood.

The idea that the mob selected an unstable Marxist ex-Marine for the assignment of killing the president will seem implausible to some, but Blakey and Billings note that in 1971 "Crazy Joe" Gallo, a New York mobster, employed Jerome Johnson, a black petty criminal known for mental instability, to assassinate fellow mob boss Joseph Colombo at a public rally. Johnson himself was shot to death only seconds after his crime. Police regarded him as a crazed lone assassin until after Gallo was murdered by Colombo associates in revenge. Perhaps mob chieftains call upon unlikely assassins for especially delicate assignments. Oswald may not have known the real background of the unidentified figures who approached him. But while appealing in many ways, the mob theory is not proven.

Twenty years after the crime the evidence boils down to possibilities and vague probabilities. Oswald may have been part of a large conspiracy or a very small one; he may

even have acted alone. The full truth would have been difficult to discover even in 1963-64; now it is probably lost to us forever.

Instead, the Kennedy assassination stands as an example of what can happen when law collides with politics. Law enforcement professionals such as Dr. Cyril Wecht, a leading forensic pathologist and an early critic of the Warren Commission, have argued again and again that the case was handled far more sloppily and inefficiently than any run-of-the-mill homicide. This was no accident. The

magnetic personality of John F. Kennedy had won him devoted followers and powerful enemies. The men who had to deal with the aftermath of his death knew that the full facts might have devastating consequences. They made sure the investigation would not be a professional, disinterested search for the truth.

Even the dead president's body was a potential embarrassment. A thorough autopsy would reveal that he suffered from Addison's disease, a fact which had been denied for political reasons. Thus, on the afternoon of his death his body was forcibly removed from the custody of Texas officials attempting to enforce Texas law and turned over that night to Navy doctors at Bethesda Naval Hospital who had no qualifications as forensic pathologists. Their failure to do a thorough job has been another source of controversy.

Americans in 1963 shared many illusions. We believed that the FBI was an utterly reliable investigative body and that the CIA would not stoop to the assassination of a foreign leader. The idea that the president might share a woman's favors with mobsters would have seemed as outrageous as the idea that the president might successfully be assassinated for political reasons.

John Kennedy's inspirational rhetoric had encouraged our simple, self-confident view of ourselves. With Lyndon Johnson calling us forward to complete the dead president's work, we had neither the time nor the inclination to consider the frightening possibilities surrounding the crime.

We have become more suspicious during the last two decades. A recent Washington Post poll [see accompanying box] shows that four out of five now believe Kennedy's assassination was the work of more than one man. We do not know for certain if that belief is correct, but we do know that our world is much more complicated than we allowed ourselves to believe in 1963.



### A POLL ON THE JOHN F. KENNEDY ASSASSINATION

Q. Do you happen to know who Lee Harvey Oswald was?

ASSASSINATED PRESIDENT KENNEDY/ACCUSED OF IT	81%
ALL OTHER ANSWERS	7%
DON'T KNOW	12%

Q. Do you feel that Lee Harvey Oswald was or was not the man who shot Kennedy?

WAS MAN WHO SHOT KENNEDY	61%
WAS NOT MAN WHO SHOT KENNEDY	17%
DON'T KNOW/NO OPINION	22%

Q. From what you know about the Kennedy assassination, do you think the important facts about the assassination have been reported or do you think there are still important unanswered questions about the assassination?

IMPORTANT FACTS ARE KNOWN	18%
STILL UNANSWERED QUESTIONS	76%
DON'T KNOW/NO OPINION	6%

Q. Do you feel the Kennedy assassination was the work of one man or was it part of a broader plot?

ONE MAN	13%
MORE THAN ONE MAN	80%
DON'T KNOW/NO OPINION	7%

Q. Do you think the U.S. government should do a large-scale investigation of the Kennedy assassination if you think that is necessary?

SHOULD DO IT	29%
NOT NECESSARY	69%
DON'T KNOW/NO OPINION	2%

Figures are from a Washington Post-ABC News nationwide telephone poll of 1,505 adult Americans. It was conducted Nov. 3-16/Nov. 7, 1983.



By Kathy Junglohann for The Washington Post

**By Barry Sussman**

**T**WENTY YEARS and two national investigations after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, most Americans think that the real facts behind the slaying of the 35th president have not come to light.

The great majority, 80 percent, feels that what led up to the fateful events in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, was a conspiracy of some kind and not the work of a lone gunman, a conclusion exactly opposite to that of the Warren Commission report, the government's first major inquiry.

Only 6 people in 10, in fact, believe that a shot fired by Lee Harvey Oswald was the one that took Kennedy's life.

Despite their doubts, though, most people appear satisfied to let matters rest as they are; 7 in 10 say there should be no new large-scale government investigation at this point.

These are some of the findings of a Washington Post-ABC News poll, conducted this month, examining what people think today about the first in a series of modern tragedies that jolted the nation. The chart provides more of the poll's findings.

---

*Barry Sussman is director of polling for The Washington Post.*