

WHAT AMERICANS THINK

SLEUTHS

Where the Experts Agree—Sometimes—on the JFK Assassination

Like the public, they don't buy the Warren report

By Barry Sussman

Last year, on the 20th anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Washington Post-ABC News poll found that most Americans feel the real facts of the Kennedy slaying have not come to light.

Four in five, the poll found, believe the assassination was the result of a conspiracy and not the work of a lone gunman. Only 6 in 10 feel that a shot fired by Lee Harvey Oswald killed the president.

Both findings showed massive public disbelief in the work of the Warren Commission, which concluded that there was no conspiracy and that Oswald, acting as a lone gunman, fired the fatal shot.

One of the people to read the Post's account of that poll was Bernard Fensterwald Jr., a Washington attorney who has been active in investigations of that assassination and the 1968 slayings of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. For a number of years, Fensterwald served as the lawyer for James Earl Ray, who was convicted of murdering Dr. King.

Fensterwald decided to see how expert opinion would compare with the polls' findings. He formulated 27 multiple choice questions and sent them to members and staff of the Warren Commission, to members and staff of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which in 1977 held an inquiry into the JFK and King assassinations, and to authors of books and magazine articles on the Kennedy assassination.

Fifty people responded, most of them scholars of the assassination. One result, therefore, was predictable: Like the general public, the experts have strongly challenged the Warren Commission report.

But the survey serves another, most unusual purpose. By putting many of the most common assassination questions to a select group of experts, Fensterwald is able to find areas of consensus, near consensus and disagreement on what led up to the events of Nov. 22, 1963, among people who have devoted much of their lives to studying the matter.

Here are some of those findings, with comparisons between the Warren Commission and the 50 experts, as reported by Fensterwald:

Was JFK killed as the result of a conspiracy?
Warren Commission: No. He was killed by Oswald, acting alone.

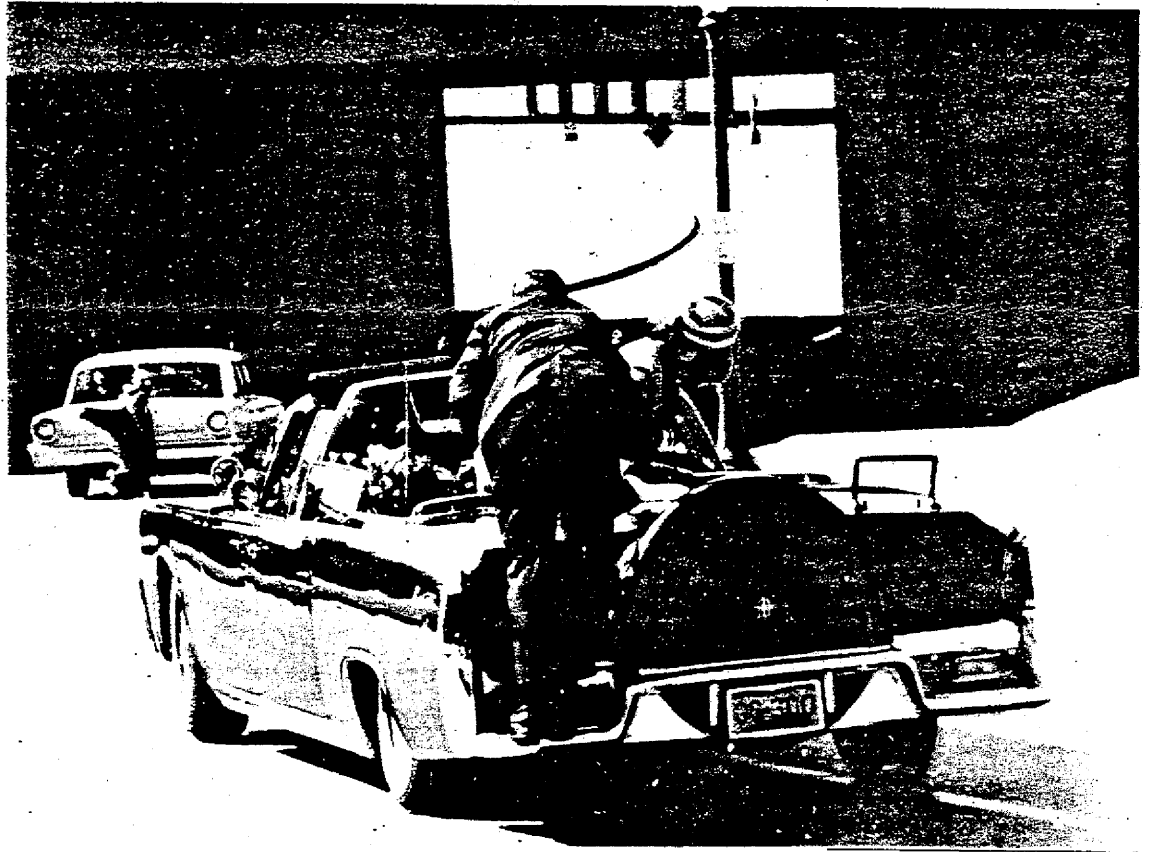
Experts: Thirty-eight of the 50, or 76 percent, say there was a conspiracy. There is disagreement over whether Oswald was anything more than a patsy in the conspiracy.

How many shots were fired?
Warren Commission: Three shots.

Experts: Four shots were fired, 22 say; more than four shots, 16 say.

Did the same shot hit both President Kennedy and Gov. John Connally, who was riding in the jump seat?

Warren Commission: Yes, a single shot hit both.



President Kennedy slumps in the seat of his car after being shot; Mrs. Kennedy and a Secret Service agent come to his aid.

Experts: Thirty-seven of the 50 disagree.

How many gunmen were involved?
Warren Commission: One, Oswald.

Experts: Twenty say two, 18 say more than two.

Was there more than one "Oswald"?
Warren Commission: No, no one impersonated Oswald.

Experts: Thirty-two of the 50 say there was a "second Oswald."

Was Oswald a genuine Marxist?
Warren Commission: Yes.

Experts: Divided. Twenty-six say Oswald only pretended to be a Marxist.

Were pro-Castro Cubans involved in the assassination?
Warren Commission: No.

Experts: Thirty-eight of the 50 agree with the Warren Commission.

Were anti-Castro Cubans involved?
Warren Commission: No.

Experts: Nineteen say anti-Castro Cubans were involved in the assassination and a subsequent coverup; eight others say such people were involved in the assassination only, and one says they were in on a coverup but not the assassination. Nine say none was involved in any way, and 13 had no opinion in this area.

Was the CIA as an organization involved in the crime or a coverup?
Warren Commission: No.

Experts: Six believe the CIA was involved in the crime; 29 believe it was involved in a coverup.

Were "dissident elements" of the CIA or former agents involved?
Warren Commission: No.

Experts: Twenty-three say they were involved in both the crime and the coverup, five others say they were involved in the assassination only, and three say they were involved in a coverup.

Was the FBI involved in the crime or coverup?
Warren Commission: No.

Experts: Forty of the 50 believe it was involved in a coverup. Four believe it was involved in the assassination.

When Jack Ruby killed Oswald, was he acting alone or as part of a coverup?
Warren Commission: Acting alone.

Experts: Thirty-nine say he was acting as part of a conspiracy.

Was Ruby motivated by patriotism and/or grief, or, on the other hand, was he ordered and/or paid to kill Oswald?
Warren Commission: Patriotism and grief.

Experts: Thirty-five say he was ordered and/or paid.

Since 1963, has there been a concerted effort to cover up facts of the assassination?
Warren Commission: Inapplicable.

Experts: Forty-one of the 50 say yes.

Did Oswald fire a rifle on Nov. 22, 1963?
Warren Commission: Yes, killing Kennedy and wounding Connally.

Experts: Twenty-eight say he did not fire a rifle; 11 say he fired at Kennedy; three say he fired, but not at Kennedy; the other eight say they do not know.

Have witnesses been murdered since 1963 because of knowledge of the crime imputed to them?
Warren Commission: Implied no in its 1964 report; inapplicable since then.

Experts: Twenty-nine say yes, six say no, 15 say they do not know.

Was the Mafia involved in the assassination or a coverup?
Warren Commission: Neither.

Experts: Five say it was involved in the crime, another five say it was involved in the coverup, 20 say it was involved in both, 11 say it was involved in neither, and 8 say they do not know.

Fensterwald holds that these views represent the conclusions of scholars who have had a great deal more time for research than the Warren Commission did. He also says such research may never end, noting that people to this day are looking into the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

Barry Sussman is director of polling for The Washington Post.