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'The Kennedy Cover-up':

Anthony Summers reports on new twists in the story of Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Ruby and the shooting of the president



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Anthony Summers

The Kennedy cover-up

'Whoever killed Kennedy, the once-respected intelligence agencies of the United States had made frantic, deliberate efforts to obscure the evidence and hide vital witnesses'

Anthony Summers produced this week's 'Panorama' report on the Kennedy assassination (BBC1). The reporter was Michael Cockerell.

A bar in an Oxford alleyway, a long time ago in my life. Early evening Muzak, first orders lined up on the counter for familiar firstcomers. On 22 November 1963, I was a student, oddjobbing to pay the bills, trying meanwhile to break into television. The break nearly came at seven o'clock that night, when the telephone rang behind the bar. The editor of Granada's *World in Action* was talking fast, on two lines at once, rustling up reporters and researchers for a charter flight to Dallas, Texas. He asked me to leave for Heathrow by taxi, in half an hour. It seemed a stupendous journalistic chance—until they rang back to say they had found someone with more experience. As the world's journalists raced to Dallas, I went on pulling pints.

The killing of John Kennedy is a cliché, pigeonholed in the memories of millions. It is a cliché, too, to say that the moment the bullets struck home in Dealey Plaza took the breath away from an era as well as a president. But it is true, and it directly altered the experience of any journalist who was to spend these last dozen years

covering foreign affairs and the United States. Perhaps that is exactly what it was intended to do, for after the 'lone nut', Oswald, was in his turn murdered, as rumour piled on disturbing scraps of evidence with every passing year, it seemed increasingly plausible that the crime was the result of a monstrous conspiracy by nameless men of power. Or was that paranoia, born of inevitable legend?

The Kennedy assassination has been for me a story of endless fascination, but one to keep away from. It has appeared what indeed it can be: a mire of half-truth waiting to swallow up journalistic reputations. I was surprised, last summer, when I let myself be persuaded into some initial research. It was Washington in May, stale with that political dirt which seems to cling and cling, not least because, for so many Americans, the effluent of the last years still seems more relevant than the call of Carter. First, there were mountains of books—in the United States a man may now pick his version of the truth from 250 volumes. Then there were the people to be sifted, the hundreds of American citizens, of all political colours and all ages, who squirrel tirelessly towards their holy grail, 'Who Killed Kennedy, and Why?' And always there was an awareness that

this is not yesterday's story after all, that hardly a day goes by without some fresh revelation, or reports of another witness violently silenced.

We eventually started filming the day after Christmas. The restraints of the medium had, as ever, forced this octopus of a story inside a harness called a shooting schedule. Our celluloid perception of myriad Kennedy clues was to be captured, for better or for worse, in four weeks of putting film through the camera. Quite coincidentally, we began where it had ended for John Kennedy, in downtown Dallas.

Below the grimy façade of the Texas School Book Depository, where Oswald allegedly once snapped off three shots in five seconds, we watched as a motley of tourists came to gawp and listen to preposterous theories from instant experts. We moved among them with the ageing man who was Dallas police chief in 1963, Jesse Curry, stumbling a little now as he led us up the famous grassy knoll. Curry still smarts from the cuts of the press who blamed his police force for inefficiency on the day of the assassination, and then later for allowing Oswald to be felled by Jack Ruby inside his police station. Retired now, he had decided to speak out more than ever before. 'I was travelling in the lead car, right in front of the president, and I immediately suspected that the first shot had come from in front—not from behind, where Oswald was. I cannot say that I believe there was one man, and one alone, shooting.'

And Curry insisted on one anomaly the Warren Commission chose—as it so often

did when things failed to fit in—to ignore. Who was the man in a perfect shooting position up behind the picket fence, who produced a secret service identity card when challenged by one of Curry's officers just moments after the assassination? There were no secret service agents anywhere near that spot on 22 November.

Working on the assassination story, and especially in Dallas itself, it is jolly to get bogged down in the minutiae of evidence—who fired from where, how many bullets, 'planted' fingerprints, 'fake' photographs. Pick your expert, and you will get an answer to fit any thesis. But, especially to the foregone, there are some facts which can still shock, and will not go away.

Why did the FBI in Dallas destroy a crucial piece of evidence within days of the assassination? Not long ago an agent confessed that he had torn up a note delivered to the FBI office by Lee Harvey Oswald before the assassination, and then flushed it down the lavatory. He did so on orders from his superior, who had in turn, it seems, had orders from Washington.

In Fort Worth, the former attorney-general of Texas, Waggoner Carr, interviewed in between court cases, dirtily agreed the destruction of evidence was scandalous. It has destroyed my feeling of confidence in what the FBI was doing. They were hiding things, not coming fully forward. Carr was also a close friend of Lyndon Johnson, who followed Kennedy to the White House and publicly accepted the findings of the Warren Commission. He confirmed that Johnson, in later years, had grave doubts. Johnson said: 'In time, when all the activities of the CIA are flushed out, then maybe the whole story of the Kennedy assassination will be known.'

As we worked on, as witness succeeded witness in front of the camera, we at least began to know what our story was. Whoever killed Kennedy, the once-respected intelligence agencies of the United States had made frantic, deliberate efforts to obscure the evidence and hide vital witnesses. In Mississippi, an old CIA agent sat on the pier and talked about coincidences. The one in question was that his name, William Gaudet, appeared on a list of visa applications for Mexico a few weeks before the assassination—immediately next to a better-known name, that of Lee Harvey Oswald.

Until very recently, Gaudet's name remained unknown, because the FBI had falsely stated in a report that there was 'no record' of the person next to Oswald on the visa list. Now that his name, and his CIA affiliation, have emerged, ironically as a result of a bureaucratic blunder by the FBI, Gaudet can only stone-wall implausibly: 'It's a coincidence and I'm going to stick with that story.'

But the coincidences abound with Gaudet. He admitted that he met Oswald, could describe him in detail, and had seen him in the company of another CIA agent. Gaudet was angry that his cover had been blown, hoped we would sympathise with him, and blurted out: 'I think Oswald was a patsy. I think he was set up on purpose . . . I wouldn't put it above the CIA to use him.'

We asked Gaudet whether, if the agency had used Oswald for intelligence purposes, they would have admitted it. 'No,' said Gaudet. Not even to the Warren Commission, investigating the murder of the president? 'Not even to the Warren Commission,' said Gaudet.

1975 began for us in New Orleans, where Oswald passed a mysterious couple of months shortly before the assassination. There, in the tangled streets of the Vieux Carré, the 'tome nut' bumped up against a villainous cast of FBI informers, agents and counter-agents, and anti-Castro exiles doubling as CIA operatives and Mafia hit-men. It was here, more than anywhere else, that we encountered fear. Another favourite cliché in conversation about the Kennedy case is to mention the number of assassination witnesses and researchers who have died violently over the years. And even if the acturaries do say the death rate is frighteningly high, the journalist must largely discount it—reminding himself that time does pass and men do die.

It is harder to sustain that attitude when he comes face to face with interviewees living 14 years on, in daily fear of their lives. The respectable doctor, badgered into changing his evidence by the FBI, afraid now to talk except anonymously, and only on sound tape. The solid citizen who met Oswald in New Orleans, and is afraid to say publicly what he witnessed. What he said seemed so important evidently that we filmed him covertly, and secretly recorded his statement, for the record rather

than transmission. Three months before the assassination, the solid citizen had seen Oswald receiving envelopes delivered by an agent in an FBI car.

Others were braver, although their forthrightness, more often than not, came only after our—my—persuasion. On the Kennedy story more than most, I asked myself time and again whether the end could really ever justify the interviews in the car.

Perhaps so. If you believe the man who claimed he saw Oswald repeatedly with known FBI officers but could not tell the Warren Commission the full story, because: 'Ten days before I was due to give testimony, I was threatened with my life by a FBI agent' (the witness named the agent) . . . he told me he would get rid of my ass, he would kill me.'

Perhaps so. If you believe the Teamsters' Union man who brought us across the United States to tell us about threats made against the life of both Kennedy's, threats he had reported to the Justice Department before their deaths. What that witness had to say was confirmed by a distinguished judge who had listened in on the witness's telephone calls, so we chose to believe him when, falling to show up for the interview, he wrote: 'I'm sorry. I can't keep the appointment with you, but for the safety of my family and myself—I just don't think it would be fair to them. I pray that some day the press over here will be turned loose like you people . . . I am sorry, but I have seen some of the injustices handed down, and I want my children not to have to live with it, because until now they have only known fear, death, and the threat of death.'

In Miami, there was another former CIA agent, Antonio Veciana. Once found, and that was difficult, he talked readily enough. Veciana had suitable credentials—he is a Cuban exile who admits to having tried, once when he visited Allende's Chile, using a gun concealed inside a television camera. If true, Veciana's story alone is sufficient to blow the Kennedy case wide open. He claims to have seen Oswald a few weeks before the assassination, in Dallas, in the company of an American intelligence officer working for either the CIA or Naval Intelligence and running Alpha 66—the most violent and unpredictable of all the anti-Castro exile groups. Just after the



The moment of Kennedy's assassination

assassination, Veciana told us, the same officer asked him to help fabricate a story that Oswald had visited the Castro consulate in Mexico City—to smear the communists and divert attention from Oswald's real movements.

Oswald's real movements? For the investigator, he moves like a double and sometimes multiple shadow on the face of the early Sixties. He was Marine and amateur Marxist, defector to Russia, and then proud anti-Castro activist all in one.

Senator Schweiker, who in 1975 chaired the Senate committee investigating the role of the CIA and the FBI in connection with the assassination, told us: 'All the fingerprints I found during my 18 months on the select committee point to Oswald being a product of, or interacting with, the intelligence agencies . . . my view is that there was a relationship between the Cuban connection and the assassination, and my view is that more than one person was involved.'

I think I shall remember best a witness called Sylvia Odio, who told the Warren Commission that, one night before the Kennedy assassination, Oswald had been in her house in the company of two anti-Castro exile guerrillas. That evening, he seemed shy and nervous, and stood silently aside while the others talked revolution. Next day, one of the Cubans telephoned to talk about 'the American'. He seemed insistent on hammering home the point that Oswald was 'an expert marksman, would be a tremendous asset to anyone . . . we Cubans should have shot President Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs, we Cubans didn't have any guts, we should do something like that.'

I do not pretend to know that anti-Castro Cubans killed the president, or that the Mafia—in league with elements of the CIA—had Ruby silence Oswald. I do know, however, the reaction of the Warren Commission chief counsel, when senior staff drew his attention to the testimony of Sylvia Odio, whom they regarded as a highly credible witness. He said testily: 'We are supposed to be closing doors, not opening them.' From any studies, that is a fair epitaph for the Warren Commission.

As for Sylvia Odio, she agreed to give us her first-ever interview, and for no reward, even though an American network once offered her a fee of £10,000. She told her story and, in the ungracious way of television journalists, we dropped it from the *Panorama* film because it was complicated and we lacked space. But her reply when I asked her why she had at last agreed to speak publicly was uncomplicated, and apt: 'I guess I have a feeling of frustration after so many years. I feel outraged that we have not discovered the truth, when I think that the American public needs to know the truth for history's sake, for all of us. I think it's because I'm angry, very angry, because of all the forces I cannot understand, and there is nothing that I can do against them. That is why I am here.'

In Washington this year, the Congressional Assassinations Committee works on in camera. The press finds it amusing, others doubt its honest intentions. That's politics. President Kennedy is dead.

Kevin Ruane Hero for the day

Moscow. In a curious way, that Army Day meeting in the Kremlin Palace of Congresses the other week prompted all sorts of thoughts about Soviet memories and Soviet leaderships. In the main speech, the defence minister, Marshal Ustinov, insisted that the entire development of the armed forces, and all their victories, were inseparable from what he called 'the wise leadership of the Communist Party'. But when he reviewed the history of the Red Army, he omitted to mention the name of its founder, Trotsky, who was assassinated in Mexico in 1940, on orders from the Kremlin. He did name several outstanding commanders of the civil war, including Marshal Tukhachevsky, but he did not say that he, along with several of the Red Army's best generals, was executed in the purges of the late 1930s at a time when, according to Marshal Ustinov, the foundation of future victories was being laid.

But the defence minister did utter the name of the former party leader held responsible for all those deaths. He noted, almost in passing, that the State Defence Committee, during the Second World War, was headed by Comrade Stalin. Press reports of the speech later deleted the word, 'comrade', and substituted the initials, J.V., possibly for reasons of ideological prudery. But the mention of the name brought a burst of loud applause.

It is more than 10 years since Mr Khrushchev's secret speech denouncing Stalin and the purges, but there is still a deep-seated memory of the man people were brought up to love. I have even seen copies of small pocket calendars for this year which bear his portrait.

He has also been portrayed in films and novels about the war. The great fatherland war, as it is known here, seems to be the sure unifying factor in Soviet society. It was probably Stalin's part in it that prompted the applause in the Kremlin, but the applause may also have been a reflex action, encouraged by the fact that audiences throughout the Soviet Union have again got used to clapping at every mention of the new supreme leader, Mr Brezhnev.

It was he who dominated the Army Day celebrations. They, for him, seemed almost to be the main object of the exercise. Significantly, Mr Brezhnev is the most decorated Soviet leader since Stalin, and now he is a war hero, too. At the beginning of last month, he published his personal reminiscences of a previously rather obscure engagement on the north-east coast of the Black Sea. In the battle of Malaya Zemlya—or the Little Land, as it is known—Soviet troops held out against German forces, trying to break through to the Caucasus, and the oilfields beyond.

Mr Brezhnev was not in command—he was a political officer. But by the end of last month, the fame of the now-legendary

Malaya Zemlya had spread, and so, too, had reports of Mr Brezhnev's courage. Just before the army anniversary, he was awarded the country's supreme military honour—the Order of Victory, a decoration originally intended for senior commanders who changed the course of the war. The party shows every sign of believing it has a winner in Mr Brezhnev—a leader it will one day have to try to forget; but it is 25 years since it had a leader of such stature, enjoying such public praise.

The man now most favoured by observers to succeed Mr Brezhnev is Fyodor Kulakov. He is just 60—a youngster by present Kremlin standards; an agricultural expert and a party administrator. He sat conspicuously at Mr Brezhnev's right hand during the speeches for Army Day—but we know little about him, and I cannot find any indication that he fought in the war.

'From Our Own Correspondent' (Radio 4)

40 Years Ago

CAPTAIN A. M. LUDOVICI: I do regard labour camps as desirable. I have visited them in Germany . . . They tend to mingle all classes together, and therefore don't allow class prejudice to develop in your people. They inculcate discipline upon those who join them . . . They give everybody in the nation a rigorous bodily training and a knowledge of hard work.

E. M. FORSTER: My objection to them is that they would lead to mental standardisation. People would have less chance of developing their own personalities and becoming creators and critics in after-life—which is what I want people to do.

LUDOVICI: Forster, you talk about the evils of standardisation—making people alike. But are you really genuinely struck with the great differences between people in present-day England? What strikes me most of all is just the opposite—their extreme standardisation.

FORSTER: Do you feel that way after you know people at all well? I agree that sometimes they all appear to be alike, especially if you regard them as fodder for some institution, but when you get to know them as individuals, some turn out dull, and others all alive and kicking.

LUDOVICI: But labour camps won't alter or get rid of these fundamental differences. The standardisation you complain of seems to be a standardisation imposed by environment, irrespective of basic personality. And I can see that about me everywhere in England anyhow. And it isn't as if the tyranny of this standardisation were due to a few lofty spirits. Remember that it is standardisation under a democracy, which means that the value of an idea in modern England is not judged by the superiority of some great spirit who inspired it, but by the materialistic test of how many bodies, how much weight in mere flesh and bones, has turned the scales in favour of it.

Efficiency and Liberty: Great Britain.
THE LISTENER 9 March 1938