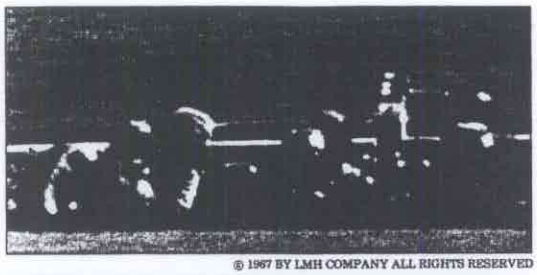
The Kennedy Conundrum

Still too many questions—and too many answers

In all the news stories leading up to the 25th anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy this week, the single most telling detail may have been a new caption on an old photo in The New York Times. "Shortly after the assassination of President Kennedy," it read, "reporters stood at the spot in the Texas School Book Depository Building *from which Lee Harvey Oswald's rifle was fired.*" [Emphasis added.] A quarter century ago, few editors would have hesitated to call it "the spot from which Oswald shot the president." But in 1988 this was as much as the Times seemed willing to assert. As assassination researcher Josiah Thompson notes, JFK's murder has been "the most investigated homicide in history." And it's only come to seem more confusing.

The official version of what happened in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, is still that of the Warren Commission: that Oswald, acting alone, killed JFK. But the Times's own poll data show that only 13 percent of Americans buy it. Two thirds believe some version of the counter-theory: that there was a conspiracy to kill the president. And 61 percent think there has been an official cover-up. David W. Belin, a former assistant counsel to the Warren Commission, says they just haven't taken the trouble to study its much-maligned 1964 report, which dismissed such possibilities. Belin's new book, "Final Disclosure," says critics focus only on evidence that fits their own theories—just as critics say the commission did.

Home movie: Conspiracy theorists have blamed, variously, the Soviets, Castro, anti-Castro Cubans or the CIA. Two new books, John H. Davis's "Mafia Kingfish" and David E. Scheim's "Contract on America," set forth the currently fashionable theory: that JFK's killing was a mob hit. The House Select Committee on Assassinations hinted as much a decade ago; new TV documentaries by former Wall Street Journal reporter Jonathan Kwitny and columnist Jack Anderson come to similar conclusions. Despite important differences, they all accept that both Oswald and Jack Ruby, who assassinated Oswald before he could stand trial, had links to the organization of New Orleans Mafia boss Carlos Marcello—a chief target of the Kennedy administration's war on crime. (The Warren Report said Ruby, like Oswald, was simply a lone nut.) But Marcello, now 78, denies he ordered the killing. And what would possess an otherwise competent crime boss to hire Oswald, with his $21.45 mail-order rifle? How was Ruby induced to murder Oswald in full view of cops and cameras?



Resigned to uncertainty? *Above, the Zapruder film shows Kennedy as he is shot, below, Jack Ruby shoots Oswald*

Scheim, unlike Davis, postulates a second gunman on the grassy knoll near which Kennedy's car was passing. If Oswald did all the shooting, one bullet behaved oddly: it tore through Kennedy's neck, shattered Texas Gov. John Connally's ribs, yet turned up on a hospital stretcher little the worse for wear. This is what the Warren Commission was forced to conclude, despite witnesses who said they'd heard a shot from the knoll. Connally insists that he and Kennedy were hit by different shots—and Abraham Zapruder's famous home movie of the assassination proves Oswald alone wouldn't have had the time to fire them both. An American writer named Steve Rivele even says there were *three* second gunmen. When he named them last month on a British documentary, one of the two who are still living came forward with an alibi. Central Independent Television and producer Nigel Turner are sticking by their story. Rivele is in hiding.

Turner's documentary has at least one chilling moment, involving a computer-enhanced photo of the grassy knoll, and a man named Gordon Arnold who believes he's in the picture. Arnold tells of filming the motorcade from the knoll when a bullet from behind whizzed past his ear—and someone dressed as a police officer took his movie camera. Shown the photo for the first time, Arnold identifies himself, then a uniformed man behind a splotch of light he interprets as a muzzle blast. "If this is true," he says, voice quaking, "then I could be the only one who ever saw the man that killed the president . . . If I'd known this [photo] was here I wouldn't have given the interview."

Simple solution: The picture, says researcher Gary Mack of Ft. Worth, who had it enhanced, "is proof positive of a conspiracy." Not likely. It's only one minuscule corner of a puzzle that never seems to come together—and which, like any one of a hundred such details, can seduce the most rational researcher into obsession. Will a new government inquiry settle the whole thing? Also unlikely. The *really* disturbing figure in that New York Times poll is that 59 percent of Americans oppose further investigation. Which suggests that nearly half of us are simply resigned to the uncertainty. There's nothing more American than an active distrust of institutions—it's there in the Constitution—but the Kennedy assassination has bred a passive despair that is unhealthy in a democracy. David Belin has a simple solution: that Americans accept the gospel according to the Warren Commission. That's not too likely, either.

DAVID GATES *with* FRANK GIBNEY JR. *in Dallas and* ROBERT PARRY *in Washington*