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OUTLOOK

Commentary and Opinion

HOW THE KENNEDY KILLING DROVE AMERICA CRAZY

America's Psychological Wound Has Never Healed

Frederick K. Goodwin

SOMETIME IN the next two weeks, nearly all Americans over the age of 35 will recall vividly where they were at that awful moment a quarter of a century ago when President Kennedy was shot. The clarity of this freeze-frame in our memories belies the passage of 25 years. Yet our lives have gone on.

For me, an inescapable reminder is that my two sons—not yet born in 1963—voted this year in their first presidential election. Along with their older sister, they are optimistic about the future of our country and their place in it—a characteristic which may have allowed their generation to play a critical role in making Ronald Reagan the first two-term president since the assassination.

The contrasts between the attitudes of their generation and mine are striking and instructive. The young adults of 1963—now matured to become the "establishment"—witnessed many as-

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We Keep 'Solving' the Case To Find Out Who We Are

By Charles Paul Freund

EVEN SHERLOCK Holmes couldn't crack the Kennedy assassination. He gave it a try in "Sherlock Holmes in Dallas," a bizarre 1980 treatise masquerading as a mystery novel—one of many cultural oddities at the outer limits of the Dealey Plaza universe. Maybe, said Sherlock, Oswald had gotten caught up in something he didn't understand. Maybe he was really after Connally. Maybe he was on drugs.

Holmes couldn't figure it out; the leads were too cold. "The case involves some remarkable features," he said on his way home. "What I might term psychological fingerprints, which are often much more revealing than the more mundane type."

Quite. Those fingerprints are in fact all over the national culture. Twenty-five years of obsessiveness—contradictory theorizing, fuzzy grassy-knoll photo blow-ups, Zapruder's blood-and-brain-spattered Frame 313, confounding bullet trajectories, static-laden dictabelts, the mysterious angle of the shadow cast by Oswald's nose in a snapshot taken eight months before the shooting (if it was ever taken at all)—all this

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Our Lasting Grief

GRIEF, From C1

pects of our national life begin to sour in the late '60s and '70s. Yet despite two-and-a-half decades of commentary and analysis, the bitterness and sense of national decline felt by many in my generation still mystifies us. Many seem to have concluded, consciously or otherwise, that our system itself is the problem.

Some 10 years ago, when I was attempting to define the origins of what then was termed our "national malaise," it occurred to me that our national mood in many ways paralleled the reactions of an individual in grief. In the individual, grief typically involves several stages, often disguised. Initial feelings of helplessness and a loss of hope in the future are followed by anger, withdrawal, a turning inward, and denial of the magnitude of loss.

When we grieve, we usually are surrounded by others who can console and support us, helping us reconnect to life. But when John Kennedy was killed, we had no one to turn to, for the entire nation was immersed in shock and grief. The psychological wound eventually began to heal, only to be torn open again as two more leaders, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, fell to assassins' bullets.

As a psychiatrist who is wary of overextending valid clinical insights, I offer my reflections cautiously. Yet my suggestion is straightforward: My generation has not healed fully from that deep wound, inflicted during our youth, by the wrenching loss of John Kennedy.

From a psychological perspective, the severity and persistence of our grief perhaps is not surprising. In 1960, international tensions and national anxieties were on the rise. The Cold War, the launch of Sputnik in 1957, and Soviet nuclear gains had begun to undermine America's confidence in itself and its institutions. Kennedy's optimism, his toughness leavened with warmth and humor, and his willingness—even eagerness—to address these problems proved to be bracing antidotes to the nagging sense that we were beginning to slip.

Kennedy led us by challenging us—"Ask not what your country can do for you . . . ." The prospect of change was accompanied by excited anticipation. Our spirits were raised, only to be dashed again in that one awful moment.

The widespread anger and alienation, drugs and disparagement that signaled our national grief did not fade but intensified through the late '60s and '70s, reinforced by events here and in Vietnam, that seemed to careen out of control. Those who, by age or idealism, identified most closely with Kennedy may have believed they felt the loss most exquisitely, but the tremors were shared by all Americans.

The breadth and depth of this response, I believe, reflected Kennedy's ability to appeal to people at a level beyond ideology, beyond class or political affiliation. His leadership seemed to bind us closely, at a time when we faced issues of great potential divisiveness.

Looking back, we can see that the unraveling of our shared sense of national well-being began with his assassination. Consider the following:

- The rate of clinical depression and of suicide among the young doubled beginning in the mid-1960s—perhaps mirroring a widespread sense that our lives were emptier, and our destinies not really in our control.
- Crimes of violence started to increase in 1964, and had doubled by the mid-1970s. Again, there was rage, isolation, and alienation, unleashed by three assassinations and reinforced by their political consequences.
- During the same period, the divorce rate doubled—perhaps, in part, reflecting a turning inward.
- Millions of Americans, unable or unwilling to make linkages with others, succumbed to the ultimate turning inward: drugs. Taken desperately and self-destructively, drugs were the ultimate paradox of grief—one that, nurtured by our permissiveness, helped seed our current epidemic of drug abuse.
- With our confidence in the future shaken by grief, we permitted our infrastructure—from roads and bridges to education and research—to deteriorate. Consider this: Between 1964 and 1980, when the trend was finally reversed, the proportion of our gross national product devoted to all research and development declined by 27 percent.

In individual grief, diminution of the significance of a loved one suggests denial—a means of mitigating an overwhelming sense of loss. Might this dynamic help us explain the rapid ascendancy and unusual tenacity of the "blame America first" crowd who asserted that nothing we did was worthwhile? Could denial help explain the revisionist challenges to the legislative record of Kennedy's administration, led so often by those who had been closest to him. These attacks missed the point, because they ignored the intangible but essential feature of his presidency—personal leadership and inspiration of a national pride that binds citizens together. Instinctively, he knew the difference between what binds and what divides a nation, and between leadership and legislation.

Do we, like the Kennedy revisionists, continue to defend ourselves against the pain of loss by attempting to diminish our leaders at every opportunity. This was noted by an astute European observer of America who commented on our recent proclivity for "ritualistic regicide." In grief, we also turn inward to avoid painful reminders of our loss. Could this dynamic help to explain the emergence, in the decade following Kennedy's death, of the "me" generation? For those least empowered, or least resilient, "me" often led to drugs; for others, turning inward may have helped to launch the era of special-interest politics.

Research on clinical depression suggests that hard-driving personalities tend to deal with feelings of helplessness by resorting to excesses of aggressive, goal-directed activity. Might this dynamic help to explain why, in the aftermath of Kennedy's death, we turned up the nation's burners, in both domestic

and foreign policy: in Vietnam, a driven need to act decisively played itself out in an unrestrained but ultimately ambivalent escalation of the war. On the domestic front, goals previously pursued through shared vision now were pursued through the aggressive legislative agenda of the Great Society.

Tensions fed by the war and the explosive growth of domestic programs contributed to the fragmentation of the Democratic Party and paved the way for an administration that later self-destructed in the national tragedy of Watergate—an especially tragic moment because it gave life to a culture of mistrust. Typified by investigative journalism and a tangled web of ethics laws, this culture has proven to be a formidable obstacle to political leadership, whatever its ideology.

When we expect loss, we can more easily accept it. But the assassinations of the '60s were unexpected and frightening. We sought to attach meaning to otherwise unintelligible events through conspiracy theories, but we were thwarted. Given the awful power of random, senseless events to alter our nation's leadership and destiny so profoundly, isn't it understandable that at some deep level, our faith in the future was shaken?

As I watch the generation of my children prepare to accept the burden of leadership, I believe that an understanding of what my generation has been through will help us all come a bit closer together. Young adults today, unscathed personally by the trauma of Kennedy's assassination, have been buoyed by the optimism of President Reagan. Nonetheless, even the young are affected by the lingering effects of our sorrow. Only if we address the grief directly will we be prepared, finally, to clear away its residue, so that now, as a new administration takes the helm, my generation can join that of my children, and get on with it.

Kennedy Theories

KENNEDY, From C1

common experience hasn't been for nothing. We may not know with certainty who shot JFK, but the varying patterns into which we've assembled the case's many pieces, tiny and large, form a revealing series of self-portraits of post-Kennedy America.

To mark a quarter-century of these now-familiar images and notions, we are exhuming the whole thing again. There's Don DeLillo's popular novel "Libra," which suggests that right-wing crazies inveigled Oswald into the shooting. There are a pair of fat books arguing that complex conspiracies were woven by the mob. There is at least one book defending the Warren Commission. There are TV documentaries galore, from a sober Nova special hosted by Walter Cronkite to a show hosted by Jack Anderson that allowed viewers to vote, via 900-numbers, about opening yet another Hill investigation, to a pseudo-trial of Oswald to be hosted by Geraldo Rivera. Magazine and newspaper articles promise to be ubiquitous. The most recent catalog of the President's Box Book Shop, a mail-order service specializing in assassination material, lists 91 Kennedy-related titles.

Every five years, when we pull the assassination off the national shelf to peek at it once more, we can catch our own reflection in it. Ask not who killed Kennedy. Ask who we hate at the moment. And at the moment, it's Carlos Marcello and the Mafia.

The parameters of the case keep changing. Just look at what the extreme right is arguing these days. James Perloff, writing in The New American, a John Birch publication, says that the murder was the work of one Marxist screwball. Well, the extreme Right has come a long way. Twenty-five years ago, the Birch end of American culture was entertaining the thesis, argued by the palindromous Revilo Oliver, that JFK was shot by the Soviets because he was their agent, and had fallen dangerously behind in their takeover timetable. The Lone Marxist Screwball thesis may be nestled at the far right today, but in the early 1960s, in an atmosphere of Cold War confrontation, it's exactly what most people used to subscribe to.

In fact, the case has been through at least five stages thus far. The LMS theory was the second, quickly overwhelming the first—the Lone Fascist Nut theory. That one didn't last very long, and was based less on any particular facts than on the idea that if Kennedy was killed in a place like Dallas, then a right-wing kook must have pulled the trigger; it was a pure cultural reflex. In 1963, the liberal American ethos eschewed Marxists and conservatives both; if the bullets didn't come from one end of the spectrum, they just as easily could have come from the other.

Anyway, Lee Oswald had the stage more or less to himself until the Warren Commission report appeared. No sooner had the commission concluded that Oswald acted alone than the 26-volume report became a target for a fusilade of criticism from Mark Lane, Penn Jones, Edward J. Epstein, Harold Weisberg, Thomas Buchanan and dozens more.

This was stage three: confusion over whether a single gunman could have pulled it off at all. Many of these early doubts centered on the actual shooting, especially the so-called Single Bullet Theory, but they soon grew to encompass events occurring many years before the shooting.

Interestingly, there was never a belief in a tiny, Booth-like cabal of assassins. The villain evolved quickly from one man acting alone to an immense and powerful conspiracy that could do whatever it wanted: manipulate the government, create multiple Oswalds, kill the president, kill the assassin (who was becoming "the purported assassin"), kill the killer of the purported assassin, kill the witnesses and even kill the investigators.

Who were these staggeringly powerful people? Stage four developed in the late 1960s and lasted into the 1970s, and reflected the growing

distrust of, if not outright contempt for, major American institutions, an attitude which owed much to the shock of the Kennedy murder to begin with, and which eventually grew widespread and powerful enough to be reflected in speculation about its solution. This was the heyday of the notion that Kennedy was the victim of the Central Intelligence Agency, which the good president had supposedly sworn to destroy in the wake of the Bay of Pigs fiasco. The CIA had, according to this stage of the thinking, linked itself to anti-Castro Cubans, wealthy right-wing crazies and the Mafia, among others.

These were hardly the only theories in circulation at the time, and one of them may be the real solution to the case. Who knows? The point is that these tales were the ones to gain currency, while other stories appeared and disappeared without breaking so much as a ripple. The notion, for example, that the Kennedy murder was revenge for the killing of President Diem of what was

then South Vietnam came and went without attracting adherents (though it was the thesis behind the novel, "Tears of Autumn"). So did the argument that Kennedy's death was part of a plot to manipulate the stock market. So did the idea that Oswald shot Kennedy because he had argued with his wife on Nov. 21. So did the theory of the Psychedelic Oswald, soaked in hallucinogens. You can argue that these theories sank from view because they were patently absurd, but then you'd be stuck defending the more popular theories on the basis of their comparative rationality.

In fact, the more far-fetched and complicated the proffered conspiracies were, the more events they covered—from Dallas to Vietnam to Watergate and beyond—the more appealing they seemed. Why?

Kennedy's death stands at a curious intersection of American fascinations. The first is simple enough: the appeal of solving a historical mystery. Answers to the conundrums of Jack the Ripper's identity, to the question of the Romanovs' deaths or possible rescue, to what really happened aboard the Mary Celeste, to the face behind the Iron Mask, or the secret of Kaspar Hauser, to cite only a handful, will always find an audience.

The second contributing fascination is the bizarre ecstasy many Americans experience as a result of the deaths of celebrities, especially youthful and popular ones. We sneer at the process in its American form because we know it best through its supermarket tabloid commercialization. But the trait is a universal archetype. In hagiography, the process is called forming a *cultus*. Kennedy is the first person in American history since Abraham Lincoln to develop such a posthumous cult.

The third aspect is the most interesting: The potential solution to the mystery seemed to offer nothing less than a conceptual breakthrough, a new paradigm for understanding a purportedly corrupted nation and its corrupted instititutions. Somewhere over the grassy knoll was the key not only to the death of John Kennedy, but to Watergate, to Vietnam, to everything.

Indeed, conspiracy, the *concept* of conspiracy, was a preoccupation throughout the culture during that period, whether it was supposed press conspiracy to subvert the news, a First World conspiracy to subvert everyone else, a business conspiracy to subvert competition, or conspiracy as entertainment, as in such films as "Executive Action," "Winter Kills" or "The Parallax View." Of course, every time we start guffawing at hidden-hand conspiratorialists, a real-live conspiracy like Iran-contra turns up.

Today, the conspiracy has been laid at the feet of the Mafia, specifically at the feet of mob boss Carlos Marcello. The Mafia has been in and out of this story for years, but now a mob hit is the center of JFK gravity. Books by John H. Davis and David E. Scheim, and the recently televised Jack Anderson documentary all arrange the evidence to make the Mafia the prime mover of the events. JFK was murdered by the mob, goes the idea, because his administration, especially his brother the attorney general, had been making life miserable for organized crime. Marcello, the New Orleans mobster, had a personal motive; Bobby Kennedy had humiliated him by deporting him without warning to Guatamala. Marcello swore revenge. Kennedy died.

It's a neat theory, because it takes care of the biggest problem the conspiratorialists have had. The years have come and gone, yet nobody involved in any of the suggested conspiracies has ever broken. The myth of the silent mob plugs that hole nicely. It takes care of Ruby shooting Oswald too; a mob looking action if ever there was one.

It also provides a way out of this whole morass for the truly committed Kennedy buff; the kind of person who keeps turning out most of the literature that keeps the case alive. Five years ago, when all this was last trotted out for the 20th anniversary, Ron Rosenbaum did a story for Texas Monthly which called the mob-hit theory a "halfway house out of the case." The reason: Blaming the whole thing on the mob solved the problems just well enough. Mob cases stay unsolved; the perpetrators don't talk, etc. It allows the obsessives to walk away from the case with the sense that they've taken it as far as they can go. What's interesting about the mob-hit ascendency in the last few years is less its plausibility, less its ability to solve the case, than the coincidence of its popularity with the emergence of organized crime as a national preoccupation and the widespread concern about drugs.

The fact is, it's not just the buffs and the obsessives who would like to be rid of this puzzle at this point, it's everybody. Although the mob was all but blamed for killing Kennedy by the House Assassination Committee, nothing concrete happened. Nothing's happening now. Nobody's demanding anybody's head. It's over. Probably over. Even if the story stays centered on the mob, that leaves lots of elbow room.

The next stage, if there is one, is going to be a stage we've already been through. Everybody big enough to have carried this off has been accused by now.

In fact, it is hardly possible any longer to talk about what happened in Dealey Plaza, and still be up to date. You have to be able to use advanced techno-talk to debate how many shots were fired, whether they were recorded, and what the various visual enhancements have to offer. It is getting beyond reach, drained of its emotional content, on the way to being a historical oddity.

Still, this Nov. 22 is different from the past. This year, the sixth floor of what was the Texas Book Depository is opening as a museum. You pay your money, you take your outside elevator up, in your mind's eye you kneel with your Manlicher cradled in your palm (or was it a Mauser after all?), and you take your aim. Resting on a knee at the sniper's nest, you can see it all. Not just the limo, but the mysterious Black Dog Man on the grassy knoll, the mysterious Umbrella Man near the curb, the rifle pointing out the second-floor window of the nearby Dal-Tex Building, and Billy Lovelady—or is that Oswald?—watching JFK from the street as the shots rang out. Ghosts who have haunted a fevered national imagination for decades.

What do you think? Can you shoot that rifle more than once every 2.3 seconds? Is there a magic bullet in your barrel? You're in the sanctum sanctorum now, and maybe somewhere out there someone is snapping an accidental picture of you that someone else will blow up and someone else altogether will computer-enhance until you're just light and dark dots on a page in a book on a shelf. And someday, somebody else will pull that book out and open it to that page, and they'll connect those dots any way they want.