

HISTORY/POLITICAL SCIENCE 315  
Politics of Assassination  
Dr. McKnight(Off hrs TBA )

Fall '83

Texts for the course: Harold Weisberg, Whitewash IV: JFK Assassination Transcript; Sylvia Neagher, Accessories After the Fact; and David Garrow, The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Statement of Purpose: The essential purpose of the course is to examine how American institutions responded or failed to respond to the major political assassinations of the 1960s--President John F. Kennedy, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The instructional content includes a variety of materials: monographs, slides, tapes, T.V. cassettes, and class discussion. The instructor regards all of these instructional devices and approaches as equally important in furthering the basic purposes of the course. The hope is that in the end the student will have a more meaningful historic context within which to judge these momentous events, and will be better able to evaluate their impact on our forms of government and the social order and will understand why these institutional failures make a course like this necessary.

Procedures: This is a course for students interested in teaching themselves and each other about the political assassinations of the 1960s. It will require some reading in government documents, some analysis of these documents, and active participation in class. The quality of the course will depend largely upon the assigned readings, which I have carefully assigned, and the quality of student participation over which I have no control.

Requirements: Students will be responsible for the assigned weekly readings and will respond to them both orally and in "journal" form which will be turned in at the end of each class session. The weekly journal entry should be about two double-spaced typewritten pages. I will comment on these journals and return them the following week. At the end of the semester the journal will be turned in for a grade. The journal is not a "book report;" instead, it should reflect your personal questions, responses, intellectual or emotional, to what you have read. The suggested questions for each class session are provided solely to get you started on the material; they are not meant to restrict you in any way. For example, your entries might ask how the reading fits together with--or contradicts--what you already know. Does it interest you, or move you in any way (fear, anger, surprise, etc)? Does it suggest new lines of analysis? You may also respond in the journal to other readings on the assassinations of the 1960s., to memories, or to interactions within the class itself. There are no "wrong" answers in the journal; the only failure is a failure to respond. In short, the journal should represent an ongoing dialogue between the student and the course curriculum. Your journals can be used in all exams in the course. You will be allowed one "bye" on the journal exercise during the course.

Grades: Grades in the course will be arrived at roughly in the following manner: Journals(25%); class participation(30%); mid-term exam(20%); final exam(20%); and oral book report(5%).

September 1st . . . . Orientation . . . . .

September 8th . . . . Dallas in Perspective . . . . .

Readings: Peter D. Scott, "The Kennedy Assassination and the Vietnam War," on Library Reserve

Senate Hearings (Church Committee): "Institutionalizing Assassination: The 'Executive Action' Capability," pp. 181-190;

Senate Hearings (Church Committee): "'Executive Action' Programs Against Castro," pp. 71-90 and pp. 120-133 ending w/ (aa), on Library Reserve

Some questions: According to the Scott article what, if any, alternatives was JFK considering vis-a-vis US policy toward the Government in South Vietnam right before Dallas? What international developments does Scott cite to support his basic thesis? How does Scott deal w/ Lyndon B. Johnson's stressing that "continuity" characterized his administration's foreign policy with that of his fallen predecessor? To your mind what relevance does the Church Committee's findings on the "Executive Action" programs have in any investigation into the assassination of President Kennedy?

Library Exercises: Be sure you read JFK's American University Speech found in the New York Times on June 11, 1963. The following is optional: You might want to check the NY Times for November 21, 1963 for reports of the Honolulu Conference referred to in Scott's article. See report on front page in article entitled "Saigon's Control in Two Provinces Periled by Reds." The pertinent material is buried in the third paragraph. Also check the NY Times for December 21, 1963 for US policy on troop withdrawal from Vietnam under the new Johnson administration.

September 15th . . . . The Warren Commission Case . . . . .

Readings: The Warren Commission Report: Chpts. 1, 3, and 4 on Library Reserve; S. Magher, Accessories, Chpts. 1 and 2.

Some questions: These three chpts. out of the WC Report should be read to give you a pretty good idea of the Commission's case and how it arrived at its conclusions. For example, what witnesses did the Commission choose to give credence? What witnesses did the Commission choose to ignore? Be sure you are familiar with the WC's reconstruction of the shooting: How many shots were fired? What was the direction of the shots (their origin)? Which of the shots missed? Have a fairly good idea of the kinds of wounds sustained by JFK and Governor V Connally according to the official findings. In what areas does Magher, if any, convincingly challenge the WC's findings?

Class reports: You should compose a mini-biography for each member of the Warren Commission. These mini-biographies should contain material pertinent in regard to the workings of the Commission. For example, what were the members political affiliations? What roles did they have in Government? Were any of these men Kennedy liberals as far as you can establish? The best and quickest source for this information can be found in the reference work entitled Political Profiles--The Johnson Years found in the Hood Library.

Class: Show the Zapruder film and slides on the JFK assassination.



September 22nd . . . . The Warren Commission in Action--"Truth Was Our Only Client" . . . .

Readings: Weisberg, Whitewash IV, read pp. 37-121 for the critical January 27th executive transcript. Read also the Eisenberg memo, February 17, 1964, and the Willens' memo for January 20, 1964, all on p. 25 in Whitewash.

Read also: The Tentative Outline of the Work of the President's Commission. And the following memoes from D. Berlin to J. Lee Rankin, Jan. 230, 1964; Memo from N. Redlich to Rankin, March 26th, 1964; and memo from Redlich to Rankin, April 27th, 1964. All these are found in "packet" on Library Reserve.

Some questions: What is the nature of the so-called "dirty rumor" that plagued the WC from the very outset, of it's work? What federal agencies stood to be compromised by this alleged rumor? What role does Commissioner Allen Dulles play in this particular session of January 27th, 1964? How does the WC finally resolve to deal with this "dirty rumor"? What do the Tentative Outlines and memoes tell us about the manner in which the WC went about solving "The Crime of the Century"? How would you characterize the WC's collective attitude toward J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI? Why?

Library exercise: Use the NY Times Index for 1964 to find out exactly when the WC heard its first witness. Now use this information to reflect back on the "packet" material containing the Tentative Outline and the in-house memoranda. What questions, if any, do you feel compelled to raise here?

September 29th . . . . Warren Commission in Action[Part II]// . . . . .

Readings: Whitewash, pp. 137-165. These pages should give you a pretty good idea of how the WC tracked down the "dirty rumor."

Read also: FBI documents on Commissioner Jerry Ford's connections w/ the FBI. See also N. Katzenbach to B. Moyers, Nov. 24, 1963; Conrad to Jevons, Dec. 2, 1963; Belmont to Rosen, Dec. 17, 1963(see addendum); SAC(Little Rock) to All Agents, Dec. 12, 1963; Sullivan to Brennan, Dec. 19, 1963; Evans to Belmont, Nov. 27, 1963; Belmont to Sullivan, Feb. 7, 1964, all in "packet" on Library Reserve.

Some questions: How did the WC ultimately satisfy itself about the validity of the untruth of these "dirty rumors"? Was this approach consistent with their self-proclaimed charge that "Truth Was Their Only Client"? What role did Texas attorney Leon Jaworski play in this whole episode? What do the documents and the press clippings reveal about Jerry Ford's role in this investigation? Why was the WC so concerned about the "leaking" of the FBI Report on the JFK assassination? Finally, you speculate on the origins of these "leaks" and the political purpose behind them(see especially N. Katzenbach's testimony on this point to WC in Whitewash, p. 138).

Class: Volunteer(s) to do a comparative analysis of the FBI Report on JFL assassination with the WC's final Report. (x-credit assigned).

Recommended(optional): Read Chpt. 5 from William Sullivan's The Bureau entitled "Flacking for the Bureau," on Library Reserve.

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October 6th . . . . The Warren Commission and the Evidence . . . . .

Readings: Meagher, Accessories, Chpts. 3, 4, and 5. This session is built around your analysis of three(out of four case studies) case studies of the evidence and how the WC went about dealing w/ the evidence.

The inventory of the materials to be use is found on attached page.

Some questions: The above "mini" studies are of such a nature that you should be able at this point in the course to formulate your own questions. Note: this assignment is not a candidate for a "bye."

Class: Volunteer to analyse the testimony of Colonel Pierre Finck before the Garrison investigation in New Orleans in 1967. (X-credit assigned).

October 13th . . . . . Mid-semester break . . . . .

Suggestion: you should be using this time to finish up you oral book report due in class on October 20th . . . .

October 20th . . . . . Class Oral Reports on Readings in the JFK Assassination. . . . .

Class: This assignment will be outlined in special handout in class

October 27th . . . . . Oswald: Assassin, Conspirator, or Fall Guy? . . . . .

Readings: Meagher, Accessories, Chpts. 6-13 and Chpt. 20.  
See also Caroline Arnold's statements to the FBI on Library Reserve. Read also material from Howard Roffman's Presumed Guilty also on Library Reserve. This material will help you place Arnold's statements in perspective. In this "packet" see also the short Summary and Conclusions of the House Select Committee on the Assassinations(1979).

Some questions: Had Oswald lived to be tried before a jury of his peers what kind of witness would Caroline Arnold have made for the defense? Were there any other likely witnesses who might have served a defense case for an Oswald "alibi."? Recalling Charles Givens' testimony, compare it w/ the way the WC and Staff treated Caroline Arnold's statements. What kind of comparisons surface with this kind of comparison? After reviewing the conclusions of the House Select Committee what really remains of the "official" version of the JFK assassination as presented by the US Government in 1964?

Library exercise: Check the Hood Library Reserve for the Supreme Court Reports on the landmark case of Brady v. Maryland(1963). How does the Court's ruling in this case compare or relate to Mrs. Arnold and her statements?

Class: Showing of the t.v. cassette "Oswald: Failure of the American Justice System."  
A Good presentation that should help to sharpen up your overview of the JFK assassination and help to focus the material for the upcoming mid-term exam . . . . .

November 3rd . . . . . Mid-term Examination . . . . .



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November 10th. . . . . 1968--The Hard Year: Election Year Assassinations. . . . .

Readings: Allard Lowenstein, "Murder of RFK: Suppressed Evidence of More Than One Assassin," on library reserve.

Read also: To help focus on RFK and the 1968 presidential campaign and where Bobby Kennedy stood on the issues read from one of the following works on library reserve:

Jack Newfield, Robert Kennedy: A Memoir. Read pp. 110-142, and pp. 230-251.

Stuart G. Brown, The Presidency on Trial. Read pp. 23-46, and pp. 66-69.

David Halberstam, The Unfinished Odyssey of Robert Kennedy. Read section II, pp. 68-123.

Questions: Formulate your own questions for this exercise.

November 17th . . . . Dr. King, the Civil Rights Movement, and the FBI Vendetta . . . . .

Readings: David Garrow, The FBI and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., read chpts. 3,4,5, and 6. Also read Director Hoover's "Black Messiah" Letter and other documents on library reserve. Read also Les Payne's "FBI Tied to King's Return to Memphis," also on library reserve.

class; sample of Dr. King's anti-Vietnam war speech, Riverside Church, New York, April 1967.

Library exercise: Using available sources found in the public records reconstruct as thoroughly as possible a chronological record of the public life and achievements of Dr. King. (You may find everything you need in King's obituary).

Questions: Your logs should reflect your own questions and reactions to the readings for this week.

December 1st. . . . . The King Case and the Evidence. . . . .

Readings: Transcript of Jim Lesar's appeal for his client James Earl Ray (about 70-80 legal brief pages) on library reserve. This assignment is optional but highly recommended for pre-law students.

Class: Jim Lesar's t.v. cassette presentation on the evidence in the King case.

Questions: None assigned for this period.

December 8th . . . . Evening w/ Harold Weisberg . . . . .