

What's buried under the grassy knoll?

"PLAUSIBLE DENIAL: WAS THE CIA INVOLVED IN THE ASSASSINATION OF JFK?"

By Mark Lane
Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991,
393 pages, \$22.95

By Carl Davidson

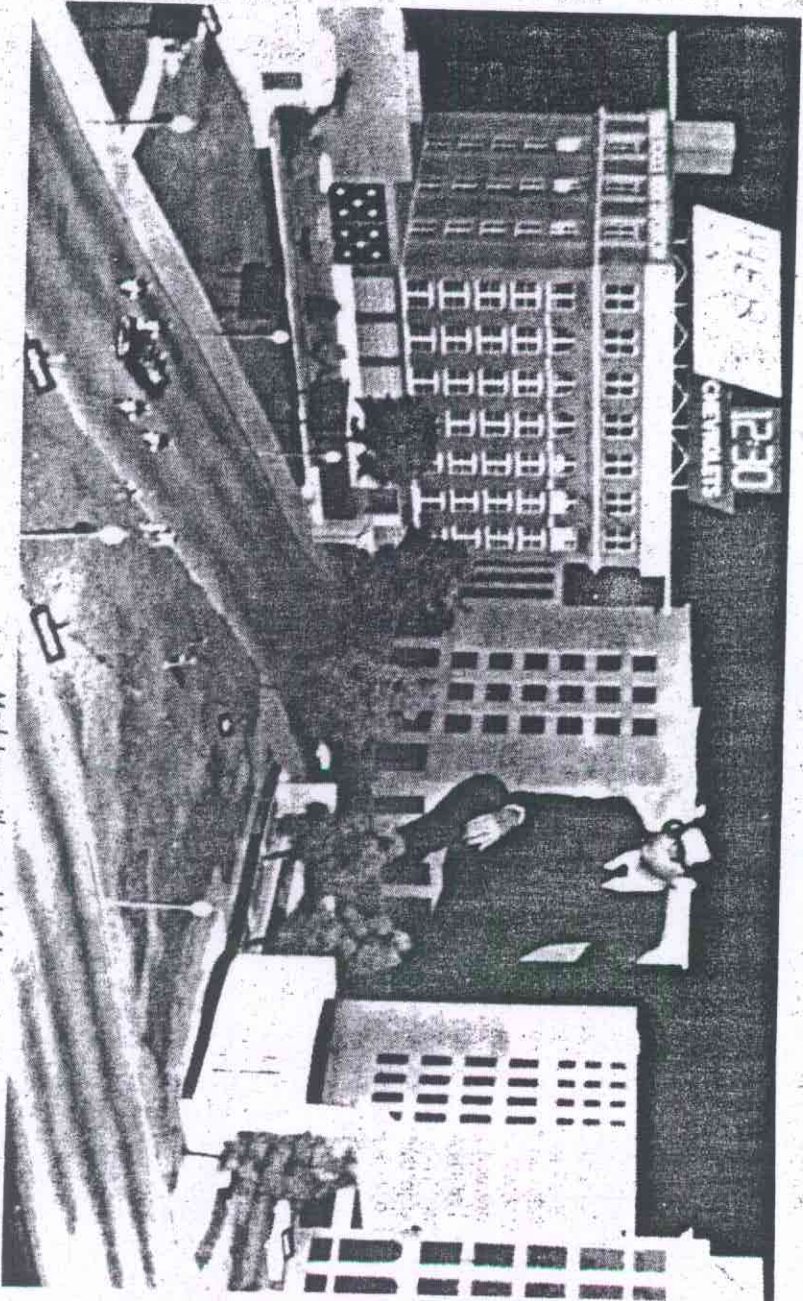
Mark Lane's "Rush To Judgment" was one of the most widely read books of the 1960s. It delivered the opening salvo against the profound weaknesses of the Warren Commission's official report on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The power of Lane's analysis transformed him from a maverick left-wing lawyer and politician into an international popular hero.

Now, after 25 years, Lane has returned to his topic with "Plausible Denial." If "Rush to Judgment" raised significant questions about a variety of institutions, this new book offers us carefully crafted answers that indict a definite handful of top CIA figures. It delivers the coup de grâce to the CIA's claim of innocence of complicity in the Kennedy assassination.

The case against the CIA

The heart of "Plausible Denial" is a courtroom drama spread out over seven years, a drama that began in August 1978 when ex-CIA agent Victor Marchetti wrote an article for Spotlight, the obscure tabloid newspaper of the right-wing and anti-Semitic "populist" group, the Liberty Lobby. Marchetti, co-author of "The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence," claimed in the article that top people in the CIA, including Richard Helms and James Jesus Angleton, had signed on to

UPI, BETTMAN, FROM 'PLAUSIBLE DENIAL'



Mark Lane with a model of the Dealey Plaza assassination scene.

a plan to offer up Watergate burglar E. Howard Hunt (also an ex-CIA agent) to Congress as a sacrificial lamb on the altar of the Kennedy assassination. By admitting that Hunt was in Dallas in November 1963 as a participant in a renegade group of conspirators against Kennedy, the CIA higher-ups hoped to deflect a deeper inquiry.

Hunt counterattacked with a lawsuit claiming that he had been defamed, and that he could prove he was home in Washington, D.C., on Nov. 22, 1963. In December 1981 a Miami jury sided with Hunt and awarded him \$650,000 in damages. The Liberty Lobby, dismayed, appealed for a new trial and sought a new lawyer.

They got both. An appeals court found a serious error in the charge to the jury, and a new trial was scheduled. And Mark Lane took the case, with the proviso that he would not be constrained by the Liberty Lobby's politics or preconceptions.

The Liberty Lobby wisely let Lane take charge. In the first trial, the defense had been weak. It had agreed with Hunt's main assertions and apologized for any misinformation, insisting, however, that there had been no "intent" to defame, only honest error.

In the second trial, Lane took the opposite approach. He argued that Hunt was a chronic liar, an extortionist and a forger, and that Marchetti's allegations were true. Moreover, he brought evidence that all the top CIA officials Hunt brought in to testify on his behalf were also guilty of perjury and other crimes, and that the CIA had been complicit in the killing of Kennedy. According to Lane, his strategy was to turn "a defamation case into the prosecution of a murder case within a civil action."

Hunt's 'alibi' exposed

Two passages in the book are especially spellbinding. One is when Lane has Hunt on the stand and exposes his "alibi" for his whereabouts during the Dallas events as totally unbelievable. The other is Lane's questioning of Marita Lorenz. Lorenz was a former lover of Fidel Castro's, who was recruited to the CIA in 1959 by Frank Sturgis (also of Watergate fame) at a time when Sturgis was still head of security for the Cuban air force. Lorenz claimed to have been in a Dallas motel room with Sturgis,

Hunt, boxes of guns, wads of money and none other than Jack Ruby, all on the evening before the assassination and Hunt's lawyers could do nothing to shake her story.

The strategy paid off. On Feb. 6, 1985, a jury ruled against Hunt's claim and affirmed that they believed Lane's case against the CIA.

"Mr. Lane was asking us to do something very difficult," Leslie Armstrong, jury forewoman, told reporters after the trial. "He was asking us to believe that John Kennedy had been killed by our own government. Yet when we examined the evidence closely, we were compelled to conclude that the CIA had indeed killed President Kennedy."

At this point, anyone might ask, why didn't we know about the trial when it was going on? Lane himself raises this question at the start of the book and answers it with a vivid description of the U.S. media's reluctance to handle the story. He shows us how he was blocked at every turn from getting his first stories out; only the Guardian, he says, stood by him in the early days, when even other progressive publications felt uncomfortable with the doubts and charges he was raising. (In an appendix to the book, Lane includes the full text of his Dec. 9, 1963, Guardian article questioning the case against Oswald.)

Lane's unsavory ties

The main virtue of "Plausible Denial" is the inspiration generated by Lane's audacity and doggedness in seeking the truth in the JFK case. That virtue has been compromised, however, by Lane's decision to maintain an ongoing professional and political relationship with the Liberty Lobby. He has stayed on as one of their chief attorneys, and Spotlight has devoted considerable space to promoting "Plausible Denial." Moreover, Lane has appeared frequently on "Radio Free America," the Liberty Lobby's short-wave radio program, and was co-editor—with none other than Victor Marchetti—of *Zionist Watch*, another of the organization's publications. Unfortunately, he appears to have become an instrument of the far right's present-day tactic of making use of progressive, anti-establishment sentiment to promote its own agenda.

That aspect of Lane's career is worthy of deeper analysis than is possible in one book review. Still, the verdict he won in Miami against Hunt remains as a small, but important, victory in a struggle that has been going on against great odds for over 25 years.

What does it mean, after all, if the president of the United States can be gunned down in broad daylight without any of his assassins being brought to justice? What does it mean if those conspirators who remain alive are still able to walk the streets freely?

In all truth, those are profoundly revolutionary questions. They are the loose threads that, if pulled persistently, could cause the entire fabric of the established order to unravel.

The facts that Lane and many others have unearthed with their persistence suggest that the United States may not be a democracy in any fundamental sense. However much we treasure our liberties and strive to restrict the abuse of power, it is possible that the

killers of the Kennedys, of Martin Luther King, of Malcolm X, of Fred Hampton and others, all got away with those murders.

Carl Davidson is director of Networking For Democracy, a Chicago-based cluster of projects promoting grass-roots access to computer and media skills. He recently worked as a writer and researcher for Denis Mueller's new documentary, "The Assassination of John F. Kennedy," distributed by MPI Home Video.