

Conspiracy Cavalcade Question: 'Who Killed JFK?' Answer: 'Does It Matter?'

By Allen Graubard

First be forewarned that nothing new about the assassination of John F. Kennedy came out during the weekend "Politics of Conspiracy" conference (January 31-February 2) held at Boston University by the Assassination Information Bureau (AIB). The Bureau is a Cambridge-based organization of people who collect and distribute information on political assassinations and possible conspiracies relating to these assassinations.

What is new, as Mark Lane, author of "Rush to Judgement," and other speakers pointed out, is the climate of opinion in the country today. The Pentagon Papers, Watergate, "dirty tricks" units, CIA and FBI illegal domestic intelligence operations have made many Americans, including Congressmen and Senators, much more paranoid.

So first the old evidence was trotted out. It goes back to the first years after the JFK assassination when a series of books and articles appeared which recounted all of the various ways the Warren Commission ignored or twisted evidence. The key point then, as both Mark Lane and Edward Jay Epstein, author of "Inquest" explained in detail, is the difficulty of the theory that Oswald was the single assassin, that he shot three bullets from the sixth floor window in the Book Depository Building where he worked, that one bullet wounded Kennedy in the neck and inflicted several wounds on Governor Connolly, and that a second bullet killed the President by blowing off part of his head. All these shots came from behind the Presidential car.

According to the AIB, the most compelling counter-evidence is the famous Zapruder film, the showing of which was a high point in the conference. The violent backward motion of the President's head after the head shot hit is considered by many as conclusive evidence that a shot had to come from the front, that Oswald was not alone, and that the Warren Commission was a cover-up. But even this particular point is over a decade old: a Philadelphia lawyer named Vincent Salandria pointed out the backward head movement, using superimposed stills, soon after the Warren Commission report came out.

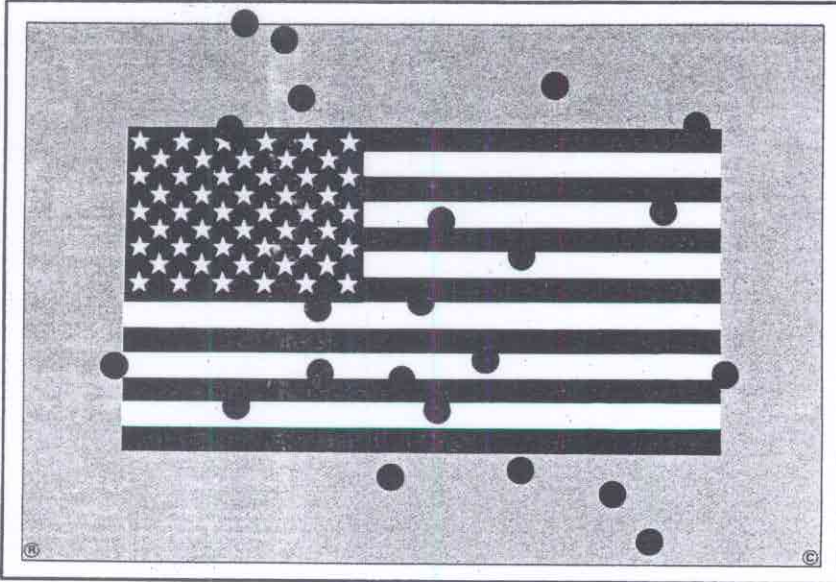
These assassination researchers are clearly right, however, in thinking that the times are much more propitious now for a respectful hearing of the kind of thing they've been saying for years. In fact, the publicity following the conference — a front page article in The Boston Globe, a substantial piece in The New York Times, news service releases describing the Zapruder film and the claimed significance of what it shows — confirms that. And it also explains the one angry outburst of the weekend, when Mark Lane called on the AIB to set some standards and not let the growing movement be discredited by association with statements and speculations that are so crazy as to leave the whole movement open to ridicule. (See box on the conspiracy crazies.)

But if Lane and the others are right about the new climate, are they right in thinking the JFK assassination and the call to open up a new inquiry on it are as they claim, the keys to a significant social movement?

Yankees and Cowboys

Ever since the movement of the '60s disappeared as an organized national presence, radicals have been on the lookout for an issue that could bring people together in a politically effective way, with a national focus that would illuminate the working of the system and move people to press for significant social change. And so some of them settled on "Who Killed JFK?"

Now we're at the heart of the "politics of conspiracy." The reasoning put forward during the conference was that Watergate and the continuing revelations concerning the CIA, FBI, and other security agencies have presented an opportunity to mobilize people against what Carl Oglesby, former SDS national president and theoretical spokesman for the AIB, refers to as "clandestinism." Then, by basing a campaign on the idea that, as Mark Lane said,



Nothing's new under the JFK-assassination sun, but that won't stop the conspiracy buffs who attended Boston's assassination conference last week. They're aiming for the big-time, a mass movement . . . and they haven't got a chance.

"something went wrong in 1963 and is still wrong," or, as Oglesby put it, we should attempt to restore the values of the republic "to cleanse the system," the assassination theorists hope to foster a movement that transcends normal politics.

The approach is this: Get everyone to demand an investigation, whatever one's motives or theories, on the grounds that we all need the truth, no matter what it is. As Donald Freed solemnly stated: "the American people can stand the truth, no matter how terrible." In the position paper distributed by the AIB, Oglesby wrote: "We all have an interest in finding out for a certainty what that truth is. If, as certain right-wingers (e.g. LBJ) have broadly hinted, the assassination plot of Dallas was the work of Castro partisans, then we all need to know that."

Of course, it's obvious that none of the people at the conference seriously consider that any such "pro-Castro cabal" truth would emerge from an effective investigation. What they expect is revelations which will have "radical" implications, that the doings of criminal elites, closely tied to real criminal forces in the form of the "Syndicate" will be uncovered, and that the ex-

posure of a plot and a cover-up will be a solid basis on which "progressive" and "left" perspectives and programs will grow.

But this confidence really needs support from a coherent theory of the conspiracy, the cover-up, and the alleged political consequences; and this, tactically, is not part of what the AIB puts forward as its political program. Actually, the only theory developed at length was Carl Oglesby's "Yankee-Cowboy" interpretation of American ruling class struggles.

Oglesby presented his theory to a packed hall on Saturday afternoon. He spoke without notes or interruption for well over two hours, and his presentation was an eloquent *tour de force*. It presented a picture of American political development, built around the metaphor of "Yankee mind" versus "Cowboy mind," or eastern Europe-oriented banking and monopolistic multinational corporate "liberal Yankees" in struggle with Westward-expanding, Southern and Southwestern based, Asia-looking, frontier-minded, entrepreneurial, militaristic reactionary Cowboys. For example, David Rockefeller as against H.L. Hunt, Howard Hughes or Barry Goldwater.

Woven into the talk was a fascinating construction of the life and significance of Howard Hughes as the archetype Cowboy and a description of the interpenetration of high crime (Meyer Lansky and the "mob") Hughes' economic doings (Las Vegas, TWA, etc.), and the political career of Richard Nixon, the mob's man going back to 1943, according to Oglesby's conception.

But a key point for Oglesby's theory or any politics of assassination is the interpretation of John F. Kennedy himself. Oglesby conceived Kennedy as seriously offending "Cowboy sensibility" by starting several "blistering radical moves" that would have eventually made him in some sense "the leading New Leftist."

Kennedy is described as having an instinct that an important new departure was needed in foreign policy so as to ensure peace in a "system of rationality" such as Wilson contemplated, a system sensibly run by Atlantic-oriented monopoly-capitalist Yankees. And by talking about an end to the Cold War, by threatening oil depletion allowances, but most importantly, by his Vietnam policy, Kennedy signed his own death warrant. Such is the theory.

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Carl Oglesby: the Yankee/Cowboy theory.



Left to right, Dick Gregory, Mark Lane and Florence Kennedy at Politics of Conspiracy Conference.

* Good point!

Conspiracy

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Oglesby's interpretation of the Vietnam policy is the key. In his view, the Cowboys moved to define a theater of vital interest in Indochina. Kennedy was willing to let them mess around there with a little "clandestinism," but he conceived of real limitations on any commitments, and the frustrations which were beginning to flow from them, as adversely affecting European relations, which are supposedly much more central than Asia to the Yankee sensibility. So he began a de-escalation, by which I assume Oglesby means the White House announcement on October 2, 1963, following McNamara's return from Saigon with a foolishly optimistic assessment of the military situation (neither the first nor last of these). The assessment was that a thousand men *probably* could be withdrawn by the end of the year and the major part of the American military task completed by the end of 1965.

Then comes the fateful day in Dallas. As

HANE'S Yes, But Do the Cubans

PRINT
Wehl
TAKEN!

The kind of claims and speculations that inspired Mark Lane's ire came mainly from Mae Brussel and Sherman Skolnick, both full-time professional assassination researchers.

From Brussel we learn that:

— She predicted Bobby Kennedy's assassination and Chappaquiddick, and that within the next few months, Nelson Rockefeller will be killed during a bomb scare (by fright?) and Ronald Reagan will be installed as the head of the total police state.

— She has the names of everyone who was involved in the murder of JFK and all the details. She read them out loud, but people ignored them.

— "J. Edgar Hoover was murdered. He ingested apple pie and there were Cubans in his house." (She was willing to stake her reputation on this.)

From Skolnick we learn that:

— The United Airlines flight that crashed, killing Dorothy Hunt, the wife of E. Howard Hunt, was sabotaged by the

theory has it, Kennedy is killed by "Cowboy gunplay," and in both domestic and foreign policy the good, new directions are reversed by Lyndon Johnson, the leading Cowboy politician. (Latin America is another area where Kennedy was supposed to be developing important new approaches, although Oglesby didn't mention that one of Kennedy's last actions in Latin America was the overthrow of Cheddi Jagan's leftist government in Guyana.)

The result of the assassination, then, is an immediate turn towards a massive ex-cadation in Vietnam, a phony retrograde domestic reform program, and the rise of the unconstitutional "clandestinism" which has characterized our government ever since the assassination and cover-up. And so it goes.

The Return of Camelot

Does it make sense? No.

Why didn't Yankee liberals who shared Kennedy's "progressive perspective" oppose the war at this time? After all, it might seem to a casual observer that it was Kennedy's closest advisers who, following

Also Have Super-Rats?

CIA under orders of the owners of United Airlines, the three television networks, Nelson and David Rockefeller and Charles Percy.

— Richard Nixon has covered up for the Rockefeller for years, since Winthrop Rockefeller gave away atomic secrets to the Russians.

— Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis have always been government agents, and were planted in poor communities as organizers back in the early '60s as part of their "deep cover."

Dick Gregory made an unannounced appearance at the conference and spoke at several sessions. Though he is not specifically into assassinations, he is high on the paranoid list. He talked about the government's plan to starve most of us, referring to "super-rats" that had been developed. Napalm can't kill them. They are presently eating all the grain in India, whose starvation will be a dry-run before the rats are tried on us. In four years, eighty percent of us will be dead.

—A.G.



Vicki Lawrence

Conspiracy theories in print, distributed at the Conference.

Kennedy's repeated pronouncements that we must not pull out of Vietnam, planned and defended the escalation for Johnson. I mean "the best and the brightest" — Robert McNamara, Maxwell Taylor, the Bundys, the Rostows, Roger Hilsman, Dean Rusk, et al, with the support and collaboration of Republican Yankees like Nelson Rockefeller and Henry Cabot Lodge, our ambassador in Saigon.

Even Bobby Kennedy didn't come out against the war for several more years, after it had become much bigger and increasingly unpopular, and the growing movement of opposition had begun to split the Democratic Party. (Oglesby's rhetorical formulation that the "shame of liberalism" is that liberals let the cover-up go unchallenged, and, "being shamed, how could they go against the war?" is hardly satisfactory as an explanation of the intense support for the war on the part of many Kennedy liberals.) And the idea that Johnson's civil rights and Great Society programs were somehow more phony (or more particularly "Cowboy" in spirit) than Kennedy's domestic proposals is ridiculous. What is obvious in Oglesby's approach is a revival of the Kennedy-New Frontier-Camelot sentimentalism that many people felt in the early '60's, before more radical perspectives were developed and spread (ironically by, among others, Carl Oglesby himself). It is sentimentalism because, in fact, Kennedy did not make any kind of ideological breakthrough, nor was he moving to bring about real change. And so the conspiracy interpretation of the assassination is left without a motivating political lever.

But if one doubts the Warren Commission version — and it is hard not to doubt it — then one is left with a very frustrating mystery, and Oglesby's passion to make sense of the event in some plausible context is understandable. Still, it's just not an issue which touches people's lives. Even if there was some complex process by which an elaboration of a theory like Oglesby's could connect the assassination to the immediate facts of the deepest economic depression since the '30s, an energy crisis, pollution, unemployment, inflation, job alienation, urban crime, inadequate housing, and even current foreign policy, it isn't clear how such an abstract, baroque, account of ruling class struggles would motivate a mass movement anyway.

Cowboys or Yankees, does it really make a difference? ■