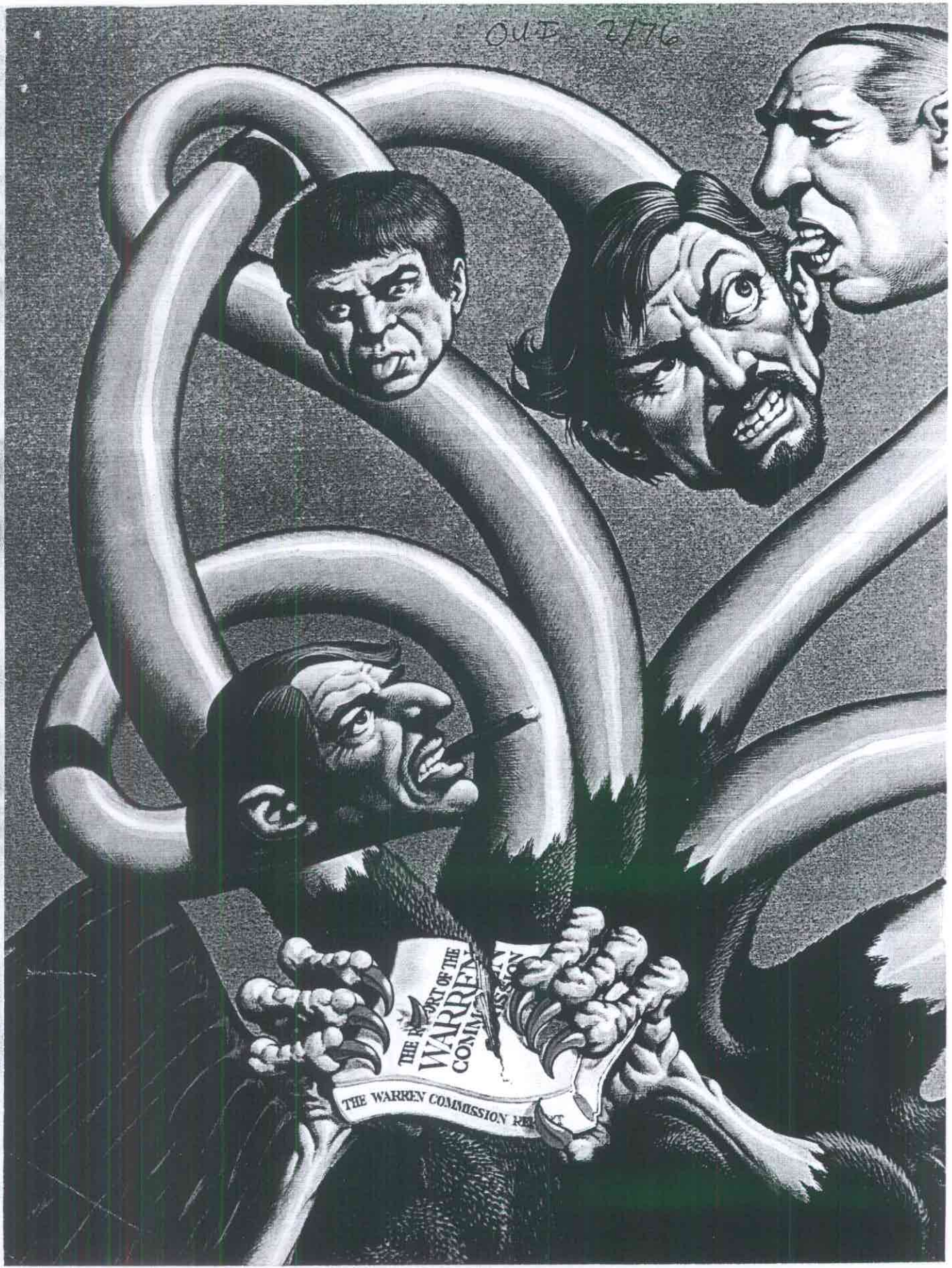


ONE 2/76





# THE ASSASSINATIONIST BUSINESS

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE INVESTIGATORS  
ARTICLE BY  
**E. PETER MODEL**

September 24, 1964. The White House oval office is packed with reporters who have come to record an awesome footnote to "the crime of the century." President Lyndon B. Johnson is about to receive the Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Chairman Earl Warren and commission members Richard Russell, John Sherman Cooper, Gerald Ford, Hale Boggs, Allen Dulles and John McCloy enter and walk together toward the President's desk. The red light of the pool TV camera blinks on, Nikons click, strobes pop and reporters' pens are poised to transcribe the President's solemn statement. Warren hands Johnson the 888-page document. There is no response. Seconds tick by. Continued silence. Warren frowns and glances at the reporters. Finally, the President clears his throat and inhales deeply. "It's, uh, pretty heavy," he drawls.

Today, 12 years later, heavy is probably the kindest description of the Warren Report that its legion of critics could muster. Most would prefer

pack of lies, or more acerbic, political truths.

That the critics of the document are legion and that their criticisms are uniformly bitter give testimony to the report's signal triumph: By pinning the rap on Lee Harvey Oswald alone and by ignoring a wealth of often-contradictory evidence, the Warren Commission succeeded in creating a countermovement of researchers, technicians, speakers,

#### EARLY TRUE DISBELIEVER



**PENN JONES, JR.** "He brings everybody and his mother into the fuckin' conspiracy," says A. J. Weberman.

writers and free-lance rumor peddlers who have transformed investigation of the Kennedy assassination into a big business. And, given the post-Watergate bull market in press sensationalism and public suspicion, it is one huge growth industry.

It is also a very informal and heterogeneous industry. Meetings are rare and rancorous, there are neither dues nor official newsletters, and the membership has never been fully tallied. Among its members, however, can be found an eclectic collection of former FBI agents and CIA officers, college professors and reformed Yuppies, clinical psychologists and forensic pathologists, workers and bankers, all sharing a common interest—what really happened in Dallas on November 22, 1963—and a common trait: distrust and suspicion of one another. While pursuing their interest, the assassinationists evince this trait by zealously guarding their "findings" like autumn squirrels and continually disparaging one another's output without hesitating to steal and

claim it as their own. [See accompanying article—*Ed.*]

If the assassinationists are their own worst enemies, however, they have escaped extinction largely because their avowed enemy, the United States Government, has persisted in behaving like their very best friend. By belligerently defending the Warren Report's lone-assassin theory, by classifying as top secret the commission's most crucial deliberations and by locking up vital evidence until the year 2039, the Government not only has kept the movement alive these past dozen years but also has seemed determined to ensure its perpetual existence.

Although the assassinationist movement did not actually get under way until the Warren Report was published, ten months after President Kennedy's death, first doubts about the lone-assassin theory were expressed the afternoon of November 22, 1963. One of the Dallas spectators, a gritty populist newspaper editor from Midlothian, Texas, named Penn Jones, Jr., returned to his office at the *Midlothian Mirror* disbelieving what he had just seen and heard. As a World War Two infantry veteran, Jones felt that he had witnessed enough men under rifle fire to know that the fatal shots in the Kennedy assassination did not

#### LATTER DAY CONVERT



**A. J. WEBERMAN** "That wild man in New York" is how Harold Weisberg describes him.

come, as authorities were saying, from the Texas School Book Depository. Jones wrote of his doubts in his newspaper columns and then, when several (Continued on page 123)

# WHEN GOOD ASSASSINATIONISTS GET TOGETHER...

## THEY SELDOM GET TOGETHER

### ARTICLE BY TOM SHALES

"Assassination," says Bob Katz, "is no longer just a nutty subject for nuts." Katz, star speaker for the Assassination Information Bureau in Boston—speeches and traveling slide shows a specialty—can remember when it was otherwise. Back in the Sixties, members of respectable society considered the assassinationists to be just another bunch of coconuts, roughly comparable to the saucer spotters or

respectability, the assassinationists have come out fighting—one another, more often than not. What they don't accuse the Warren Commission or the CIA of doing, they accuse fellow assassinationists of doing. Dissension among them seems to be growing just as they achieve their greatest degree of public support and success.

Still, that success has been enough to transform a cult into what one assassinationist calls an industry and another calls a circus. The movement, which is what Katz and most others call it, consists of two main strata: the researchers and the promoters. Researchers try to tie up loose ends, secure access to classified documents, contemplate such artifacts as the famous Zapruder film, blow up photographs until they are indecipherable deserts of grain and call one another crazy.

Promoters disseminate these findings and try to stir up the masses by giving illustrated assassination travelogs (Katz's show costs \$750 a night), talking on talk shows and trading conspiracy theories like kids exchanging bubble-gum cards. (In fact, lots of them are kids; the A.I.B.'s 26-year-old Michael Gee—14 years old when President Kennedy was murdered—says he's into assassinations because he's always liked mystery stories and "crime in general.")

In addition to the researchers and the promoters, there are the amateurs—people who originally were the targets of all this propaganda and who now proclaim themselves to be experts. They might be celebrities such as Dick Gregory, Mort Sahl, Geraldo Rivera and Gore Vidal, or they might be Mr. Bojangles down on the corner. Susan Ford didn't know it, but the Outerspace Band of Wendell, Massachusetts, which played at her

#### EARLY TRUE DISBELIEVER



**HAROLD WEISBERG** "Poor Harold. He's attacked everybody except himself," says Mark Lane.

the Krishna kooks.

Not now. The old paranoids are being joined by a new breed of post-Watergate conspiracy hunters, and the main difference between the old paranoids and the new paranoids is that the new paranoids are probably right.

"People are getting hip to the likelihood that the powerful operate in a covert, conspiratorial way," says Katz, "and we're getting more of a cross section of political views. The conservatives and the reactionaries never had any trouble disagreeing with the Warren Commission; it was the liberals who were reluctant to face the facts. Now even the liberals are coming around."

And so, after years of leading a quasi-underground existence and struggling for

White House prom last spring, is "heavily into the whole assassination trip," according to band manager Eric Weiss.

Researchers do the real toiling and sweating, and the high Pooh-Bah of this work—though some would dispute that and claim the title for themselves—is probably Mark Lane, the onetime New York politician whose *Rush to Judgment* rushed onto the best-seller lists in 1966 and thus became the first pop success of assassinationism. In 1975, Lane founded the Citizens Commission of Inquiry, an umbrella organization for assassination investigators, which operates out of a town house located directly behind the Supreme Court building in Washington.

On a typical day at the C.C.I. town house, a teenage boy is collating in the hall while, in an inside room, attractive women volunteers gossip about a staff meeting Lane is conducting in another building around the corner. "There's going to be accusa-

#### LATTER DAY CONVERT



**SHERMAN H. SKOLNICK** "Skolnick and his hippies are just plain wreckers," says Bernard Fensterwald, Jr.

tions, recriminations and hard feelings," one of them predicts. Unanimity is a rare commodity in this movement.

Boxes and boxes of Lane's *Judgment* line the walls and even fill the fireplace, while a Sherlock Holmes-type hat sits atop the refrigerator. Stacks of C.C.I. promotional pieces lie about, one noting proudly that *Time* magazine has called Lane "one of the three most popular lecturers on college campuses."

Katz and colleagues in Bos-

ton will tell you there is relative harmony among the promoters, but among the researchers there are perpetual squabbling, ego tripping and

#### EARLY TRUE DISBELIEVER



**MARK LANE** "There's nothing Mark wouldn't do or wouldn't say if it seemed expedient," says Harold Weisberg.

denunciations. The things they have in common include a universal suspicion that their phones are tapped, a penchant for promising you a copy of a document to back up anything they say ("I have the files right here . . ."), a habit of accusing those with whom they disagree of being CIA agents and a certain certainty that Lee Harvey Oswald *didn't do it*—at least not alone, at least not the way the Warren Commission said he did it. Once past this point, the dissension begins.

One of the most squabble-some researchers is Harold Weisberg, a 62-year-old former Maryland poultry farmer who once sued the Federal Government for \$300,000 because he said military helicopters and sonic booms from Air Force jets were scaring the shit, but not the eggs, out of his chickens. Weisberg has written six books on the Kennedy assassination and has accused others in the movement of stealing his research.

"Weisberg is bitchy," says Katz. "He's a very, very accurate and aggressive researcher and a poor writer. A strange guy. Kind of cranky."

"I was his lawyer for a while," says Bernard "Bud" Fensterwald, Jr., a Latter Day Convert who organized the Washington-based Committee to Investigate Assassinations in 1968. "But I had to give him up. He's too irascible."

"Poor Harold," says Lane. "He's attacked every single group and every single person except himself."

And what does Harold say?

"I'm a cantankerous old bastard," Harold says, "but I don't say only bad things about people. I separate people. I just do not like to see people's minds being ripped off by a lot of misinformation. I believe in truth and honesty. These other people look at me and their consciences bother them. I pay no attention to them. I stay home and do my work."

Last April, a friend of Weisberg's read a speech Weisberg had written but was too ill to deliver to a New York assassinationist clambake. The speech attacked those who had grown rich and famous from their investigations into the Kennedy killing. This seemed to be a reference to Lane. *Seemed? Hell!*

"I didn't mention Lane by name, but there was no mistaking it," says Weisberg, the man who, with Lane, can claim major responsibility for keeping doubts about the Warren Report before the public for lo these many years. "I'd say it was about as kind an understatement as I could make about him. He wants to be a famous man, to be known as the guy who took the whole case apart. All he's done is run around getting paid for making speeches. Now how does that make him an expert? Mark is a skilled showman; there's nothing he wouldn't do and nothing he wouldn't say if it seemed expedient. He is always on the 'right side' of an issue and never unselfishly."

Back to you, Mark. "I hope you aren't going to publish that stuff," Lane moans, when apprised of Weisberg's sentiments. "It isn't constructive. I'm sorry about Harold. Harold is very suspicious and very vicious to anyone who has come in recently on this, and he insists he was the first. It's silly to get into who came first. I was there at a very early stage. November 22, 1963, in fact. Harold was nowhere near being the first one, but he was there very, very early, too."

Lane is not rich and famous, he says. Well, not rich, any-

way. "I had a better income before the assassination. I was one of John F. Kennedy's two campaign managers. *The New York Times* was urging me to run for mayor. Of the money I've made this year, 30 percent goes to the lecture bureau that books me and the remaining 70 percent goes to C.C.I., from which I do not draw a salary. In the past 60 days, I've spoken at 55 colleges and universities."

Weisberg is not impressed. "Now the last go-around I had with Lane, he pulled an indecency. We were on live television, and he said he'd learned that L.B.J. made a secret Executive order keeping everything on the assassination secret for 75 years. Well, there is no such order. The truth is more horrendous—that the existing machinery makes it possible to keep things secret *without* Executive orders. So Mark said to me, 'You can't get along with anybody,' and I told him, 'You expect everybody to sit still for your misstatements.'"

Push has a way of coming to shove.

"So then, during a break, he said, 'After this show is over, I'm going to punch you in the nose.' I said, 'Go ahead

#### LATTER DAY CONVERT



**BERNARD FENSTERWALD, JR.** "He has a lot of people fooled; actually, he's a CIA agent," says A. J. Webberman.

and punch me right now! Well, he didn't touch me. Everything is just a show with him."

How about that, Lane?

"Harold is too old for me to punch in the nose," Lane says. "I feel sorry for him. If we could only get Harold to (Continued on page 121)

**WHEN ASSASSINATIONISTS GET TOGETHER** *Three men in shabby togs were photographed in Dallas on the day of the assassination. What nobody can agree on is who these tramps were.*

(Continued from page 79) show the hostility toward members of the Warren Commission that he has shown to all the others investigating the assassination, that might be a good thing."

Let us leave these two hardy scrappers for a moment and move on to other fields of battle within the assassinationist establishment. There are many. Points of view converged graphically at a landmark in dissension, the conference held at Georgetown University on the tenth anniversary of the Kennedy assassination.

It seems that Alan J. Weberman, the well-known New York yipster and man about garbage (starting with Bob Dylan's), and Sherman H. Skolnick, oft-embattled leader of a Chicago group called the Citizens Committee to Clean Up the Courts, wanted to stage a demonstration outside the National Archives building to protest the fact that John F. Kennedy's brain was missing. (It is missing, as a matter of fact.) But Bud Fensterwald, who was running the show, did not want the demonstration to take place and neither did co-organizer Richard Sprague, an electronics engineer and photo sleuth from Hartsdale, New York.

This produced a protracted brouhaha, the history of which is cloudy. Suffice it to say that there was a melee at the registration desk, a table was overturned and a secretary's finger was bent.

"Skolnick is just a plain wrecker," Fensterwald scowls, propping his feet in their white buckled shoes atop his desk in a posh law office two blocks from the White House. "We were trying to have a serious conference and he came in with a bunch of hippies and tried to make trouble. It doesn't seem to me that this has much to do with cleaning up the courts."

A reporter tried to reach Skolnick in Chicago to check on Fensterwald's story and found out from his recorded telephone message that "our chairman and spokesman is in jail—again," this time after staging a demonstration in an Indiana courtroom. But Weberman can be reached in New York. Boy, can he be reached.

"That story's just total fuckin' bullshit," he says. "Fensterwald has had a lot of people fooled for a long time. He pretends to be this liberal attorney running around Washington trying to stir up interest in the Kennedy assassination. Actually he's a CIA agent. His whole committee is funded by the CIA."

Fensterwald says that he does not recall ever having met Weberman and that his committee is "unfunded." But one former director of Fensterwald's committee says that he "would not be

shocked" to learn that it is CIA backed.

"Fensterwald made a deliberate cover-up of the CIA involvement in the assassination on the Tom Snyder [*Tomorrow*] show," says Weberman. "He said, 'There is absolutely no evidence that the CIA was involved.' Well, that's just not fuckin' true, man. Because that little tramp in Dallas was E. Howard Hunt."

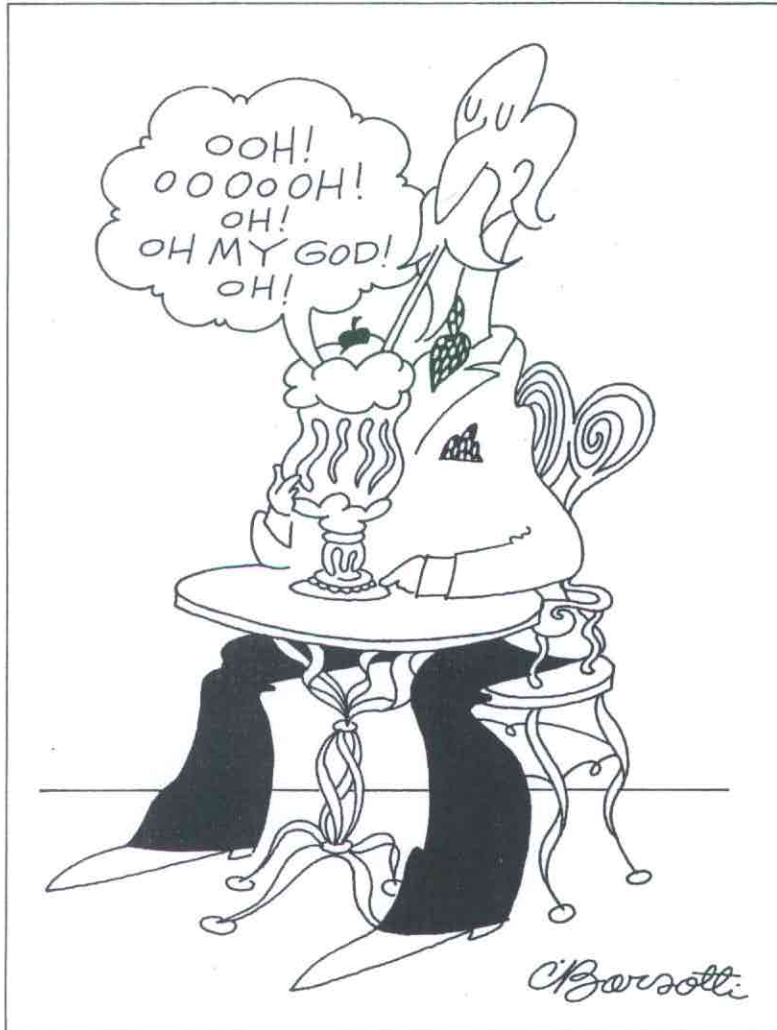
Which little tramp is that? Ah, yes, the tramps. Three men in shabby togs had their pictures taken by three different photographers during the confusion at Dealey Plaza in Dallas on the day of the Kennedy assassination. What nobody can agree on is who these tramps were—everyday average tramps or, in fact, CIA agents, including Hunt and Frank Sturgis, both of whom went on to the late-great Watergate.

Weberman says that his work with "photographic overlays" proves that Hunt and Sturgis are two of the bums. Sprague, who has also tinkered with the photographs, says that's hooey, because the tall tramp is 6'4", which is too tall to be Sturgis (Hunt is much shorter). Weberman says no, the tall tramp is 6'1", about right for Sturgis. Both say they have gone to Dallas and measured a wall the tramps were standing in front of to determine their heights.

"Weberman would love to find Hunt and Sturgis in Dealey Plaza," says Sprague. "But it doesn't take much to convince yourself that it's not Hunt and Sturgis."

"Well, at least there's a resemblance," says Weberman.

Sprague claims that he can prove that



**WHEN ASSASSINATIONISTS GET TOGETHER** *Plots, plots, plots. They abound, they multiply, they regenerate. Some people believe that Audie Murphy was sacrificed because he knew too much.*

Hunt was in Washington on the day of the assassination, attending a sneaky meeting with disgruntled anti-Castroites who were planning another invasion of Cuba to make up for El Floppo at the Bay of Pigs. But J.F.K. had already said he wouldn't sanction another invasion, so why were these guys talking about one *unless they knew* that Kennedy was breathing his last in Dallas that very November day?

"It's too damn coincidental for my money," says Sprague.

But these theories go on and on, and some assassinationists believe that more conspiracy theories are not what the movement needs most at this time. "There is entirely too much speculation in this field," Lane complains. He's trying to get some respectability into the circus.

Weberman, cutup though he is, says he's after the truth, too. "Don't lump me in with all those other guys, please," he says. "I've spent hours and hours on this thing, man. I've been into this since November of 1973, when I first got the tramp pictures. I spent all last summer in the National Archives, and I speed-read papers that would stack up 100 feet.

"I know you think assassination researchers make too many people guilty, right?" Right. "Well, *everybody* wasn't involved. Only a few of the Dallas police were involved. But you got to remember, there was tremendous anti-Kennedy sentiment at the time. I'm convinced we have the assassins of President Kennedy in this country right now. But it's a little hard to explain. I don't consider it a conspiracy. I consider it American history. It happens to have gone this way."

Like a lot of people, Weberman is on the Weisberg shit list. Weisberg refers to Weberman as "that wild man in New York." Weberman refers to Weisberg as "a bitter old man."

Weisberg says of Sprague, "He's gone hog wild."

Sprague says of Weisberg, "I think he's flipped. For the past two years he's been yelling and shouting. He wrote a long diatribe against everybody and a long and awful letter to Mark Lane."

But everybody agrees on one thing: Penn Jones, Jr., is the farthest-out of all. Jones, a former Texas newspaper editor and perhaps the very first Early True Disbeliever, has declared, among other things, that Jack Ruby was "fed cancer" in his jail cell; columnist Dorothy Kilgallen could have cracked the whole case after her last-minute interview with Ruby—if only *she* hadn't been

murdered in 1965; there were no less than eight teams of assassins on duty in Dallas that November day of 1963; and former Presidents Johnson and Nixon, as well as President Ford, were all in on the conspiracy from the beginning.

"Penn Jones says he's got a list of people who were killed mysteriously," says Weisberg, "and that they took secrets to the grave. Well, what secrets? I don't know of any."

Says Weisberg antagonist Weberman: "Jones brings everybody and his mother into the fuckin' conspiracy." Say Weisberg and Weberman antagonist Fensterwald: "If Marguerite Oswald's 98-year-old aunt died of diabetes, Jones would say, 'I told you so.' That sort of thing hinders serious investigation."

From the Texas town of Midlothian (population 3000), where her husband, Penn, temporarily hospitalized with pneumonia, does his assassinationist work, Louise Jones defends her husband's tireless research and describes the role she herself has played. "I'm the one who puts in all the allegedlys," she says.

Plots, plots, plots. They abound, they multiply, they regenerate. Some people think there were two Lee Harvey Oswalds (at least) and two Sirhans and God knows how many James Earl Rays. Some people believe that Audie Murphy was sacrificed to the cause when the assassins decided he knew too much. Organized crime, Jimmy Hoffa, the CIA, the FBI and a Maryland outfit that watches for flying saucers have all been cited as tied in with this mess in one way or another. The hideous part is that some of it *has* to be true—if only because of the sheer odds of it all.

"Some people have gone round the bend on this thing," says Lane. "There was one woman at the A.I.B. conference in Boston who read a list of 45 assassins she claimed were involved in the J.F.K. killing. They cut her off after five minutes or she said she would have named 110."

She also proposed that even Abraham Zapruder, who took the famous home movies of the assassination and sold them to Time-Life (which proceeded to hide them away out of most people's reach), was himself part of the conspiracy. Zapruder is now, like so many others, dead. Then there are all the related or unrelated assassinations: Robert F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, the attempt on George Wallace. Some say that Aristotle Onassis' son, Alexander, died under myste-

rious circumstances, and that Onassis himself knew who killed J.F.K.

Obviously the crackpottery displeases Lane, who presents himself as Mr. Non-Nonsense. "I know this subject attracts people who are paranoid, in addition to normal people. This tends to obscure the constructive work that is being done to bring about a conclusion."

Lane hopes his Citizens Commission of Inquiry can serve as an umbrella under which warring assassinationist factions will find peace. "This is a movement that cannot be stopped. A few years ago, we could hardly get anybody in Congress interested in this thing. Now we have about half the members of Congress interested. Bills are being introduced. Freedom of Information Act suits are being filed. You know, fully one fifth of the entire Warren Commission investigation is still classified, and many of the documents that are available have big pieces cut out—just as if somebody used a razor blade on them. Talk about deception!"

What does Lane expect to find at the bottom of this? "I don't even think about that. I just believe that Congress investigating is the only way the truth can be known. I don't know any better approach to end this decade of deceit. This has been a really disastrous period in American history."

You can say that again, Mark. And you will.

Weisberg has filed six Freedom of Information Act suits himself—"more than any other writer in the country," he says—and he has secured access to information hailed by others as invaluable, though he is not getting the credit he thinks he deserves.

"They ripped me off in *Rolling Stone*," he says with sadness. "They don't even have me down in their piece as one of the 'nuts,' and I did most of the basic work on the subject. I don't think you know how hard it is to try and hold a middle position on this. You've got people saying there were 50 assassins at the scene of the crime. What the hell were they doing, sweeping the streets? Most of these other people are beyond their depth in this. People such as Lane are not about to do work when they can make speeches and be famous."

Lane looks for hopeful signs of increasing public interest. Recently he saw one. "They selected me to be listed in *Who's Who in America*." It took ten years, he notes happily, but they finally came around. There may be hope for us yet. ■

**ASSASSINATIONIST BUSINESS**  
*"They" are everywhere.*

(Continued from page 78) people associated with the assassination—eyewitnesses and others—met untimely, sometimes violent, deaths, he started to keep a running count and to speculate on the existence of a vast, murderous conspiracy. Jones, now retired from his publishing duties, continues to keep his morbid tally (his count of assassination-related deaths now exceeds 60) and he has also written four books, *Forgive My Grief*, volumes I, II, III, IV, which popularized the theory that Lyndon Johnson was one of the men behind it all.

With his early columns and his chronicling of Dallas-related deaths, Jones represents the wing of the assassinationist movement that can be called the Early True Disbelievers—those who began dissecting the Warren Report as soon as it was published and who have since been trying to convince the public that the document does more to prove Oswald's innocence than it does to prove his guilt; to these trail blazers must go the distinction of having made an unnamed grassy knoll adjacent to Dallas' Dealey Plaza one of the best-known landmarks in American history. In the movement's other wing are found the Latter Day Converts, some of whom began as Disbeliever acolytes but who, for various reasons, never got truly stirred up until subsequent events—the Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations, the Watergate developments—began to tell them that conspiracy may be the *only* way things get done in America.

Both the original and latter-day wings, moreover, can be divided into two subgroups: the diligent, selfless crusaders who assiduously compile mountains of facts, figures and documentation; and the demonologists who blithely accept any rumor—the more outrageous, the better—and make it fit their favorite leitmotif, that Dallas was merely one small incident in a much larger conspiratorial skein in which the American people are helpless pawns of a monstrous, international power bloc known as They. This power bloc is everywhere—even within the movement itself; especially within the movement itself.

The next Early True Disbeliever to come to public attention after Jones was Mark Lane, a former New York State assemblyman who wangled his way into the Warren Commission hearings as Marguerite Oswald's lawyer and ended up serving as the unofficial defense attorney for her slain son. Afterward, Lane wrote *Rush to Judgment*, which attacked both

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**ASSASSINATIONIST BUSINESS** *The years 1966–1968 constituted what might be called the First Golden Age of Assassinationism. Then the movement suffered a near-fatal blow.*

the proceedings and the report, an unpopular position to take at a time when the country was lionizing the Warren Commission as a model of legal probity.

After 15 publishers had rejected his manuscript, Lane found himself in London debating Warren Commission staff counsel Arlen Specter on BBC-TV. Siding with Lane in criticizing the report was Hugh Trevor-Roper, the noted Oxford historian who had earned distinction with his pioneering research on the conspiracies of Hitler Germany. Trevor-Roper observed that Lane's manuscript lacked credibility and that he, a best-selling historian, would provide same by penning a glowing introduction. He did, and Lane was launched.

The successful bidder for the suddenly credible manuscript was the firm of Holt, Rinehart and Winston, then owned by Texas oilman Clint Murchison. When Murchison's friend J. Edgar Hoover first heard of Holt's interest, he sent a top FBI aide to New York to try to talk Holt out of the Lane contract. That was a tactical error, according to Holt spokesmen: It was partially because of the FBI's keen interest that Holt decided to deal with Lane, and the book that 15 publishers had rejected went on to sell 1,500,000 hardcover copies and millions more in paperback.

Shortly before Lane's *Rush to Judgment* appeared in 1966, the first book-length attack on the Warren Report had been privately published. Its title was *Whitewash* and its author was Harold Weisberg, a former Congressional investigator and retired Maryland poultry farmer who now ranks as the most prolific author of all the Early True Disbelievers. With no fewer than seven books to his credit, each of them the result of vast original research and all but two of them privately published, Weisberg is clearly different from the rest of the pack. For one thing, he is a professional investigator. In the Thirties, Weisberg worked as an investigator for Wisconsin Senator Robert LaFollette, and during World War Two, he was employed by the Office of Strategic Services as an intelligence analyst and researcher.

Weisberg became his own publisher only after more than 100 publishers in the U. S. and abroad had rejected *Whitewash*. Today, when the publishers would pay top prices for Weisberg's writings, he won't go near them, preferring to squeeze out a precarious living free from the taint of commercialism.

Weisberg has also received attention because he, more than any other assassinationist, has tried to bait the Gov-

ernment with its own Freedom of Information Act. In 1975, for instance, Weisberg triumphed over the General Services Administration in forcing the declassification and release of key Warren Commission transcripts; these were the records of the executive-session discussions in which the subject of Oswald's CIA and FBI connections was brought up—and quickly squelched.

The year 1966 was a seminal point in the history of the assassinationist movement. Weisberg's *Whitewash*, published late the previous year, was followed in quick succession by Lane's *Rush to Judgment* and Edward Jay Epstein's *Inquest*. The Early True Disbelievers' diligent work was at last beginning to bear fruit and the vaunted Warren Commission was beginning to encounter sharp criticism from nonmovement sources. *The Washington Post* was the first prestige newspaper to begin probing into the assassination; its lead was followed by other newspapers and news magazines, and the next couple of years constituted what might be called the First Golden Age of Assassinationism. Interest in—and promotion of—the subject kept the since-departed *Life*, *Look* and the original *Saturday Evening Post* alive well past their primes, and by 1968, no fewer than 30 commercial books and 130 privately published manuscripts were in widespread circulation.

Then, in 1968, the movement suffered a near-fatal blow. The politically ambitious district attorney of New Orleans, Jim Garrison, mounted an inept prosecution/persecution of Clay L. Shaw and his gay Cuban *caballeros* and, in the process, managed not only to lose the good will of millions of sympathetic Americans but also to turn the movement into warring pro- and anti-Garrison camps and to squander completely the support of the prestige media.

Even before the Garrison debacle, however, there were signs that rationality was giving way to freakiness, as speculative conspiracy theories metamorphosed into assassinationist gospel. In *Whitewash*, for example, Weisberg had soberly raised the possibility that there may have been several Lee Harvey Oswalds, as the Warren Report kept putting Oswald in two or three places at the same time (Mexico, Dallas, New Orleans); Richard H. Popkin, a Washington University professor, embellished the point in an article for the *New York Review of Books*; Garrison read the article and "improved" on the theory in his early public pronouncements; Popkin then published his successful book *The Second Oswald*,

in which the theory was not only elaborated upon but also chiseled in stone as Holy Writ. (Lane also adopted the theory for the film he co-authored in 1973, *Executive Action*.)

This transformation of idle speculation into the one true word helped lead to Garrison's downfall, and with it came the end of phase one of the assassinationist movement. At the height of public and media interest in Garrison's investigation, in early 1967, the Harris Poll had recorded 66 percent of the American public as disbelieving the Warren Report's lone-assassin theory; by the end of 1967, the figure had dropped to about 60 percent and was to sink even lower during the following months. In 1968, a New Orleans jury acquitted Shaw; in 1969, Garrison was tried—and acquitted—on charges of bribery and income-tax evasion; in 1970, the voters of New Orleans retired the erstwhile Jolly Green Giant from public service.

Along the way, the media had withdrawn their sympathy for the assassinationist movement, and abandoned their interest in investigating assassinationist theories. *The New York Times* and CBS News found the movement to be irresponsible and deceitful. *Newsweek* was downright bitter; wrote White House correspondent Charles Robert: "The assassination industry's products would never stand the scrutiny of Consumer's Union. Consumers buy its products as they buy most trash: The package promises satisfaction, but the innards are mostly distortions, unsupported theories and gaping omissions."

The fact that this was pretty much the same thing that the movement had been saying about the Warren Report was of little moment. Jim Garrison was beaten, and his cause was in disrepute.

The fringes of the movement had destroyed its center, and the demonologists rushed in to finish it off. The Early True Disbelievers scattered, some packing up their files and storing them away for another day; others, such as writer/researcher Paris Flammonde, moved to the hills to investigate flying saucers; still others turned their critical fire on the movement, with Epstein writing a sequel to *Inquest* titled *Counterplot: Garrison vs. Everybody*.

The movement remained moribund the next couple of years, until the double- and triple-knit fabric of Watergate began to come unraveled in mid-1972. The multiple conspiracies that wove around the break-in and the cover-up suddenly made thinking the unthinkable fashionably thinkable once



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more. The press, for its part, rushed to prepare regular doses of heady sensationalism for a public increasingly suspicious of people in high places and, once Watergate was reduced to a heap of faded threads, fastened upon the subject of assassination conspiracies. The media now told of abortive plots against Fidel Castro, of apparently successful plots against Rafael Trujillo, and of resuscitated theories regarding plots against President John F. Kennedy.

The assassinationist movement was flush as never before. The Early True Disbelievers swung back into action—Weisberg publishing another volume of *Whitewash*, Lane going Hollywood with *Executive Action*—and there were many new faces to keep them company.

Shortly before Jim Garrison self-destructed, a successful criminal lawyer and archetypal Latter Day Convert named Bernard "Bud" Fensterwald, Jr., had established in Washington the Committee to Investigate Assassinations ("the town's other CIA," *The Washington Post* called it). Ironically, Fensterwald, who was later to represent James W. McCord at the Senate Watergate hearings, had first gotten interested in assassinology as a result of a casual encounter with Garrison during a New Orleans business trip in early 1968; the district attorney's enthusiasm for his then-popular crusade had inspired Fensterwald to read the Warren Report and subsequently to organize the movement's own CIA, as a clearinghouse for assassination research.

One of Fensterwald's first projects was to recruit Richard Sprague, a computer expert who is known in the movement for his analysis of photographic evidence, and for the two of them to begin converting thousands of pages of research to computer punch cards. Funds were hard to come by in the post-Garrison days, however, and after raising only \$5000, the pair abandoned the project.

Another Fensterwald-Sprague venture was a two-day conference at Georgetown University, which was billed as a commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the Kennedy assassination but turned into something of an assassinationists' homecoming party. Among the old-grad Early True Disbelievers in attendance were Sylvia Meagher, the World Health Organization researcher whose *Accessories After the Fact* remains a movement text on the assassination; Haverford College professor Josiah Thompson, the man who first postulated the theory that President Kennedy was killed in a cross fire; and Pittsburgh coroner Dr. Cyril H. Wecht, fresh from a successful duel with the National Archives, which

had resulted in his getting a rare peek at the Kennedy autopsy report. The Latter Day Converts were represented by, among many others, Robert Groden, the young New York optics technician whose image enhancement of the Zapruder home movie of the assassination has received much recent media attention.

Alas, the demonologists also showed at Georgetown and, as one participant later said, "their presence was clearly divisive." The demon hunters and conspiracymongers had, of course, been present in the movement from the beginning; one of the earliest was Mae Brussell, a 46-year-old California housewife and peripatetic writer-lecturer who theorizes that Howard Hughes was buried at sea by Aristotle Onassis in 1957, that Adlai Stevenson was murdered with a cyanide-gas gun because he knew too much about Dallas and that J. Edgar Hoover was felled by two Cuban domestics who fed him poisoned apple pie.

In the Sixties, however, the demonologists, like Brussell, were an isolated minority who, after Garrison, were totally ignored. Within the Latter Day Convert wing, they are far more vocal and insidious than before; they are accorded space on meeting platforms alongside the most respected researchers, and the press listens closely to their lurid tales of dark conspiracy, hoping for the clue that will break open the next Watergate.

The movement's new undisputed champion of demonology—and prime disturber of the Georgetown affair—is a muscular, paraplegic court researcher from Chicago, Sherman H. Skolnick, whose credo is "If we don't act weird, nobody will pay attention." Skolnick receives a good deal of attention.

Assisting Skolnick with his investigations and with his wheelchair is a swarthy, gun-toting, sinister-looking fellow from Gary, Indiana, named Alex J. Bottos, Jr. At the push of a tape-recorder button, Bottos will happily spin nonstop tales of a megacorporation world conspiracy run by the Rockefellers and the Rothschilds, with the active complicity of the CIA, the British MI-5 and the Italian Mafia. (Skolnick is also occasionally assisted by Alan J. Weberman, the reformed Yippie and celebrated Dylanologist whom some movement members suspect of being a Government infiltrator; after all, Weberman's book, *Coup d'Etat in America: The CIA and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy*, was published by the very same firm—The Third Press—that produced Jerald terHorst's friendly biog-

raphy of Gerald Ford!)

Although presently all roads lead from Dallas to Watergate in the Skolnick-Bottos *Weltanschauung*, they sometimes detour at Chicago's Midway Airport—for it was Skolnick's remarkable explanation of how a United Air Lines flight came to crash at this little-used terminal in December 1972 that thrust him into the pantheon of movement crazies. The flight, which originated in Washington and which carried CBS News correspondent Michele Clark and Mrs. E. Howard Hunt, was made to crash, according to Skolnick's theory, when the pilot and crew were felled by cyanide. Skolnick's explanation: Mrs. Hunt was on the lam from the Watergate gang and was carrying \$2,000,000 in cash and negotiable securities, which was Nixon's hush money for the White House plumbers; Miss Clark was onto the story and was pursuing Mrs. Hunt for the details.

It was a lot of story to swallow, but the press had a go at it. Even *The Washington Post* assigned a reporter to check it out and carried a long front-section piece on Skolnick and his theory; the article concluded that Skolnick was nuts—but still, he was in the *Post*.

The phenomenon of the assassinationist movement's post-Watergate renaissance was best exemplified at a three-day conference held at Boston University in early 1974, under the sponsorship of the fledgling Assassination Information Bureau. The A.I.B. had expected that perhaps 500 people would register for the multimedia conference; instead, 1500 showed up.

As drawing cards, the A.I.B. had imported a few of the diligent, earnest Early True Disbelievers. But the members of the audience were not interested in some gray-haired researcher's boring litany of facts and statistics; what this conspiracy-hungry group had come to hear and see were the Latter Day demonologists. A manifesto calling for the politicizing of the assassination-conspiracy question during the 1976 elections was read; petitions demanding that Congress investigate Dallas were circulated; scabrous books and scandalous pamphlets were hawked; sessions were jammed to overflowing; films had to be repeated several times; fights broke out, factions were rent, new alliances were formed, and a good time was had by all.

A movement had been reborn and had grown to raucous adolescence in a few short months. Observed one of the A.I.B. organizers: "Boston was our Woodstock. You ain't seen nothing yet." ■