

to the last chapter of Donald Spoto's excellent 1993 biography of Marilyn Monroe, in which Spoto recounts the controversy over Mailer's over-hyped *Marilyn* book of two decades previous. In that fluffy 1973 work, Mailer dropped none-too-subtle hints that Robert F. Kennedy was involved with the death of the actress. Did Mailer really believe this? Apparently not: He told *60 Minutes* that he felt Marilyn had died accidentally. Then why did Mailer smear RFK? "I needed money very badly," he told his TV interviewer.

In 1983, Mailer came into big money when he left Little Brown, his longtime publisher, for Random House, which signed a \$4,000,000 four-book deal with the author. *Ancient Evenings*, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, and *Harlot's Ghost* followed. When he completes *Oswald in Minsk*, his publisher will have finally gotten what they paid for.

In a way, Mailer's most recent fiction work bears a deliciously appropriate title. As a literary figure, he has become a ghost of his former self. And as a historian, he has become quite the...

...nope. Better not finish that thought. But I wanted to register the temptation.

"They Call Me Gus!" (Another Outing)

The third big Oswald-did-it book will come from a fellow named Gus Russo (pronounced *ruse-oh*) who is worth a few words, none of them kind. Forgive the upright pronouns in the following section, but this one's personal.

More than eighteen months ago, I got an out-of-the-blue call from Russo, then known as an assassination buff who had helped edit the published screenplay of Oliver Stone's *JFK*. "If Stone trusts him, he's gotta be cool," I reasoned, and so I spoke as freely to Russo as one would to a best friend.

He explained that he was heavily involved with a PBS *Frontline* special on Lee Harvey Oswald. This special, he maintained, would prove the case for conspiracy. Specifically: *Frontline* would air declassified documents establishing that Oswald worked for the Office of Naval Intelligence. Russo repeatedly assured me that the show would demonstrate Oswald's spookery beyond any doubt.

Pretty impressive. Naturally, I wanted to assist this *Frontline* investigation in any way possible.

Russo said he wanted to know anything and everything about the people visiting Guy Banister's office before the assassination. (Anyone who has seen the Stone film knows who Banister is.) I told him that acquaintances of mine were close to tracking down an elusive, little-known witness who had performed key duties in the Banister operation.³

Cut to November, 1993: Gus Russo's *Frontline* special airs, and I discover that his telephone call was about as misleading as those famous signs reading *Arbeit Macht Frei*. Nearly the entire documentary is an ode to the glories of Posner. The show also features Patricia Johnson MacMillan, author of the unconvincing *Marina and Lee*; Newly released CIA documents identify her as a witting Agency asset, a fact never mentioned by PBS. *Frontline* pooh-poohs the very idea of conspiracy. No mention of "documents" proving Oswald's work for ONI.

By this point, I couldn't help suspecting that Gus Russo was as spooky as Caspar, and a lot of other people felt likewise. These suspicions deepened when files from the House Select Committee on Assassinations started to come out. Turns out that Banister witness I had discussed with Russo knew a lot of interesting stuff and had spilled many a bean to the HSCA investigators after they granted him immunity. Alas, Russo (with PBS funding, a luxury envied by other researchers) tracked this witness down in 1993 and got him to deny what he had said some fifteen years earlier.

This denial raises questions of its own: If the witness told a bogus tale in the 1970s, why did he demand immunity at that time? But the damage was done. Russo found out — from me, dammit! — that other researchers were pursuing an overlooked lead, a lead more significant than anyone realized, and he got to the witness in question first.

File this one under M for Mouth, as in me-and-my-big.

Now Gus Russo has reportedly received an advance of one quarter of a million dollars to write a book about the assassination. Unbelievable! Can you name any other first-time author (not counting celebrities) who has ever received that kind of money?⁴ Especially for yet another book on JFK? Titles on this subject may have sold well immediately after the Stone film, but they're not hot-sellers these days — many stores don't even stock the newer works.

Russo has told differing stories about this forthcoming book to various JFK researchers (Peter Cross, John Newman, Gary Aguilar, etc.), but a general image of the quarter-million-dollar volume has come into view. The Russo bottom line: Oswald did it, the Warren Commission said so, and that settles it. The Russo kicker: Oswald did it on behalf of Fidel Castro, and those damned Kennedys hushed up the true facts of the assassination to protect the deceased President's image. It seems that John the Blood-thirsty desperately wanted to see Fidel's bearded head dancing on a spear, and he forced those nice boys at CIA to concoct assassination schemes against the Cuban leader, even though they didn't really want to.

This last bit of balderdash will probably go over well with leftists of a certain stripe, the kind for whom all weapons are fair in their ongoing war against Main Enemy JFK. (I'm sure Noam Chomsky will love Russo's "revelations" — of course, Chomsky once blamed the murder of Patrice Lumumba on JFK, even though Lumumba died before Kennedy took the oath of office.) But the whole idea is disproven by a newly released 1967 report, written by the Inspector General of the CIA, giving the full history of the Castro assassination plots. Those plots began in 1959, and the Agency desperately tried to keep them secret from the President. JFK had, in fact, been seeking a detente with the Cubans directly before the assassination, sending peace-feeler messages through ambassador William Attwood to Cuba's U.N. ambassador Carlos Lechuga.

Where, you might ask, is Gus Russo getting his "information?" Good question. Here, as Paul Harvey would say, is the rest of the story:

By Russo's own admission, he's been cozying up to none other than *William Colby and Theodore Shackley*. (He originally told a JFK researcher that these meetings also included Richard Helms, but he later retracted that story.) Anyone who has read anything about the CIA knows these individuals and their horrifying history. But Russo is proud to have struck up an acquaint-

tance with these gentlemen. He's been quoted as crowing proudly, "They call me Gus!"

I can think of other names.

—M.C.

Notes:

1. By contrast, the begetter of a book like, oh, say, *Recycled Doonesbury* can hardly claim that he isn't in it for the money.

2. Posner finally got around to mentioning this business in the paperback edition of *Case Closed*. (Compare the first footnote for chapter 14 in both the hardcover and softcover editions.) He tries to save face by claiming that the Failure Analysis defense team presented a weak case. Indeed it did. By the company's own admission, the computer team working defense did not set out to prove a conspiracy, but merely to raise doubts about Oswald's guilt in the jurors' minds. The fact that the defense made only a limited effort hardly bolsters Posner's argument; quite the opposite.

Failure Analysis participated in the ABA mock trial in order to demonstrate to lawyers the effectiveness of using computer graphics in presenting a legal case. The company used computer graphics to illustrate the defense and prosecution positions, not to recreate fully the assassination. The correspondence between the company and Harold Weisberg, reprinted in his book *Case Open*, makes this point quite clear. No computer can truly recreate the JFK assassination; a genuine recreation would involve firing weapons in Dealey Plaza.

Weisberg makes another good point: To illustrate the case for the prosecution, the Failure Analysis team relied on information gleaned from second hand sources. (Garbage in, garbage out.) Had they gone to first hand sources — the varying testimonies of the Parkland and Bethesda doctors, the interviews with the Dallas nurses, the questioned X-rays, and so forth — they would have come up against all the same controversies and inconsistencies that medical specialists like Dr. Gary Aguilar and Dr. David Mantick are now trying to resolve.

Incidentally, during the initial flush of Posner hype, Tom Brokaw and other media heavies pretended that *Case Closed* represented the first application of computer technology to the JFK case. In fact, the Warren Commission critics have used computers for decades — for example, some early pro-conspiracy photographic analyses first appeared in the technical journal *Computers and Automation*.

3. I give only sketchy details of this business in order not to step on the toes of another writer, who wants to pursue this topic.

4. By comparison: Anne Rice stunned many when she received the queenly sum of \$12,000 for her first novel, *Interview With the Vampire*. Russo has beaten her badly. And I'm sure it's the kind of beating she disapproves of. □

Yes, Virginia, There Is a Lone Nut

Pretend that you live in the most secure residence in North America: bodyguards everywhere, anti-aircraft guns on the roof, impenetrable wrought-iron fences. Then imagine that you visit a part of the world thronged with suicidal mass-killers of opposing religious faiths who ALL hate your guts. And yet you return home without receiving even a paper cut.

Then pretend, if you can, that before you left, a man whose name nobody now remembers dive-bombed his airplane into your yard a few feet from your bedroom. And then imagine that "Security" and the newsmedia explain the incident by saying the dead pilot was "despondent." And then, after you've returned unscathed from Suicide-Killer-City, some unimpeded bozo peppers your family's house with 30 bullets from a public sidewalk and nobody, not a soul, has the slightest idea why.

And then imagine that, at this very same time, you're being viciously assailed as a leader of vile far-left political forces you actually never had anything to do with. Would you think that something, er, fishy, was going on, that there might be some sort of organized operation to drive you nuts, if not drive you into an early grave?

Of course you would not! Because if you did, you'd obviously be one of those wacko *conspiracy buffs*! And you're certainly not one of *those* pathetic fools, even though your Vice-President once publicly alleged that a—gasp!—conspiracy assassinated one of your predecessors back in 1963. Obviously the airplane "crash," the mute gunman, and the hate campaign are all just weird *coincidences* that are part of life. You know, just like that recent false alarm in the White House which enabled platoons of armoured "firefighters" to enter your home without previous security clearance. No siree, no time's available to fret over such trifles.

And good thing that's so. Otherwise you might start fretting about other trifles like:

1. Frank Eugene Corder, the "despondent" kamikaze pilot vanished from sight three weeks before his already forgotten landing beneath your bedroom window.

2. Sidewalk sharpshooter Francisco Martin Duran vanished from sight a month before he "shot" to national prominence. He spent his unchronicled army career in a military prison.

3. Periods of pre-assassination, unaccounted-for "missing time" figure prominently in the life reconstructions of many of America's most notorious "lone nuts," like Lee, Sirhan, Artie, Sara Jane, John, James Earl, Squeaky, *et al*.

4. Corder evidently started going 'round the bend when his dear old dad bought the farm. Seems Dad worked for years at Maryland's Edgewood Arsenal, site of some of this nation's most appalling, illegal and (once) covert mind-control and biological warfare programs. When John Corder was asked how his brother gained access to the Cessna he stole and piloted into the White House lawn, he professed puzzlement but added that "Dad had a whole lot of keys for airplanes he worked on."

6. Briefly, the Durans' neighbors told newsmedia that Duran belonged to a shadowy, proto-fascist "militia." Then they stopped being quoted or stopped talking.

But you are the President, and you're not going to succumb to such silly, paranoid speculation.

Yes, Virginia — uh, *Bill* — there is (as you well know) a Lone Nut, or two, or ten. And just because they congregated around you during a six-week period which also marked your party's national Armageddon, why, that's no reason to believe anything else other than that it was all some sort of great, big *coincidence*! Right, Bubba?

In most nations, the concept that violent, secretive, sinister groups occasionally travel-unlawful avenues to power is itself a cliché that nobody bothers to deny. But not here, no siree! We are AMERICANS!! And as our den mothers, omniscent high