

'JFK': Lone-assassin debate

Four doubters have pursued truth for decades

By Mike Castro
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THEIR NAMES carry none of the quality of media stars, but Harold Weisberg of Maryland, Mary Ferrell of Texas, David Lifton and Paul L. Hoch of California all share something in common.

None of them believes that President John F. Kennedy was killed by Lee Harvey Oswald acting alone. And they have spent a good portion of the past 28 years in the forefront of ferreting out information about the assassination and sharing it.

They certainly don't have the superstar clout of Oliver Stone, who can take his conspiracy theories and turn them into "JFK," a controversial movie starring Kevin Costner. But Stone is a relative

newcomer to the assassination conspiracy theory community.

JFK assassination theorists have been cropping up since 1964, the year the Warren Commission issued its controversial report. These four, and Stone, and all the others who've ever wondered whether Oswald firing from his perch in the Texas School Book Depository made sense, belong to the community that is unsettled by the unanswered questions surrounding the assassination.

They have their individual reasons, but all feel a fundamental urge to make sense of something so unthinkable.

Sacramento attorney Malcolm Segal, a former prosecutor, puts it this way: "It's easier for us to concede that one drunken driver can cross two lanes of traffic and

wipe out our entire family than for us to concede intellectually and emotionally that a similar lunatic can kill our president and change our lives. . . .

"In order to achieve any degree of sanity in our everyday lives, we have to feel it is part of an overall plan or design in the universe. When everything changes based on the act of one person, it puts into question our entire value system."

This isn't to say the theories are wrong. But those who have devoted so much of their lives to finding an answer began with a basic human need to understand.

Take the four mentioned, for example:

■ Weisberg, 79, is an elderly

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man with a speedy mind in a failing body. He has had triple bypass surgery and has other health problems. What keeps him looking into the Kennedy case?

A search for truth.

"I'm not a conspiracy theorist," he said. "I've written seven books without one."

NO, WHAT Weisberg turns to is not so much a conspiracy theory, but facts that he thinks punch holes in the Warren Commission report and its conclusion that Oswald alone killed President Kennedy.

Weisberg said he once worked as an investigative reporter and served as an intelligence analyst and trouble-shooter for the old Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency.

He obtained the early "secret" transcript of Oliver Stone's movie, "JFK," and leaked it to the press, setting off a maelstrom of criticism, because, as Weisberg saw it, Stone was rewriting history, much as the Warren Commission had done.

"I didn't steal it (the transcript), as Stone said. Someone gave it to me," Weisberg said.

He began his assassination theory work by waiting for the issuance of the Warren Commission report and analyzing it.

His first book, in 1965, was entitled "Whitewash."

Weisberg said he has collected about "one quarter million pages" of documentation on the assassination, including many FBI reports and transcripts of executive sessions of the Warren Commission, which he obtained after suing the government. What he has done is question the findings, not furnish his own theories as to what happened.

"Who do you know — except a crazy nut like me — who is going to stand up to them? Who can and survive politically?"

■ Mary Ferrell, 70, of Dallas, Texas, found her interest in the assassination grow out of intellectual questions about how the Dallas police found Oswald so soon, even though his clothes and size didn't match the description.

She was instrumental in the House Committee on Assassinations finding a key piece of evidence that the committee later used to pronounce that Kennedy was probably killed as a result of a conspiracy.

Ferrell was already engrossed in the assassination when she learned in February 1964 that Dallas police had a police radio dispatch tape used on the day Kennedy was killed. She obtained a copy, and she and a friend

spent two years transcribing these tapes, analyzing them, trying to deduce from them what happened.

In September 1977, when the House Committee staff met with Warren Commission critics, Ferrell told them about the tape. Through the study of the tape, the House Committee was able to obtain a dictabelt that acoustical experts said recorded four shots fired at Kennedy. The Warren Commission said there were only three shots and no conspiracy. The House Committee finding was later discounted by a panel of scientists.

Ferrell, a legal secretary, said parts of the case intrigued her.

After the assassination, she began buying every newspaper around and began cross-indexing names and key data on 3-by-5 index cards.

"I now have over 40,000 cards," she said. They will be put on computer for use by libraries and researchers. Ferrell retired from her job on Dec. 31.

■ Half his lifetime ago, David S. Lifton was a student at UCLA with a background in math, physics and engineering. He planned to become a scientist. One day in 1966, Lifton suffered a shock.

While studying in one of the 26 volumes of data supporting the Warren Commission report, he discovered that photos of the slain president showed his head thrusting backward. That meant, Lifton thought, that Kennedy was shot from the front instead of the rear, in direct contradiction to the official finding by the Warren Commission.

"That's what got me started ... what shocked me out of my wits," Lifton, now 52, said. He has pursued that lead for 25 years. It led him into a writing career.

LIFTON'S BOOK, "Best Witness," appeared in 1981, maintaining that the president's wounds were altered between the time the body left Dallas and the time the formal autopsy took place at Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland. He said his finding is verified in an FBI report.

"All of my stuff comes from the evidence," Lifton said.

"I'm sure there are people who believe because of psychological reasons. I don't. If I run into someone who believes there was a conspiracy, and that person doesn't care about evidence, I have no intellectual respect," Lifton said.

■ For Berkeley computer programmer Paul L. Hoch, 49, his fascination with whether Kennedy was killed by conspirators started innocently enough.

He attended a Bay Area meeting in 1964 in which Warren Commission

critic Mark Lane issued a challenge. Lane, an attorney, didn't believe in the lone assassin theory. Lane exhorted the audience to "go check it out."

"He was persuasive, and I was younger," said Hoch, a programmer at the Office of Institutional Research at the University of California, Berkeley. Hoch went through the massive report and its 26 volumes of data.

In Volume 18, Hoch found one of Lane's references. A certificate showed that the doctor who first examined President Kennedy destroyed his initial autopsy notes.

Hoch has been hooked ever since.

Improbable explanations. Contradictory evidence. Missing evidence. They are spurs for those looking to make sense of the senseless.

Weisberg said the proof on the Kennedy conspiracy is in the government record, through the end product: "Nobody in the world has ever been able to duplicate the (sharp)shooting attributed to Oswald," he said. "The Warren Com-

mission got the best shots the country could produce, and they couldn't do it with Oswald's rifle in the time permitted."

So they, and we, are left to ponder.

Said attorney Segal, "The way we psychologically and intellectually maintain our value system is to take the position: There must have been a conspiracy; there may be more than meets the eye — or it destroys our faith for the future."