

Book Review

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Writers on the Grassy Knoll: A

By Stephen E. Ambrose

SO many important people and powerful agencies wanted to murder President John F. Kennedy in November 1963 that they all but had to draw straws to see who got the first shot at him. According to Jim Marrs's book "Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy" — one of the primary sources for Oliver Stone's movie "J.F.K." — Kennedy was killed as a result of a conspiracy.

Stephen E. Ambrose is the director of the Eisenhower Center at the University of New Orleans. The third volume of his biography of President Richard Nixon was published last year.

"Who done it?" Mr. Marrs asks. "A consensus of powerful men in the leadership of U.S. military, banking, Government, intelligence and organized-crime circles ordered their faithful agents to manipulate Mafia-Cuban-[Central Intelligence] Agency pawns to kill the chief." This conspiracy has been hidden from the public by the greatest cover-up of them all, the Warren Commission.

"Crossfire" is No. 5 on the New York Times nonfiction paperback best-seller list, one of four books on the Kennedy assassination that have made the lists this week. Mr. Marrs, a journalist in Texas, writes that the motives for murder were: Attorney

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General Robert Kennedy's attack on organized crime (Mafia motive); President Kennedy's failure to support the Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs (Cuban and C.I.A. motive); the 1963 Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (military-industrial complex, or M.I.C. motive); Kennedy's plan to withdraw from Vietnam before the end of 1965 (Joint Chiefs of Staff and M.I.C. motive); Kennedy's talk about taking away the oil-depletion allowance (Texas oil men motive); Kennedy's monetary policies (international bankers motive); Kennedy's decision to drop Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson from the ticket in 1964 (L.B.J.

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motive) and Kennedy's active civil rights policy (Texas racist billionaires motive).

With that kind of a consensus, why didn't they just combine forces in the next election and spend a lot of money and vote him out of office? Because, Mr. Marrs explains: "Two more Kennedys were waiting in the wings for their turn at the presidency. A Kennedy 'dynasty' was in place.

"Therefore the decision was made to eliminate John F. Kennedy by means of a public execution for the same reason criminals are publicly executed — to serve as a deterrent to anyone considering following in his footsteps."

ACCORDING to the Texas lawyer Mark North, in "Act of Treason: The Role of J. Edgar Hoover in the Assassination of President Kennedy," Hoover, the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, used his power (in his files he had something on everyone) to manipulate and support a Mafia plot to kill Kennedy, using contract killers. After the deed, Hoover guided the F.B.I. agents conducting the investigation of the crime to the quick conclusion that Kennedy was killed by Lee Harvey Oswald acting alone. Hoover then forced President Johnson to help cover up the assassination and to adopt an indifferent attitude toward organized crime. Hoover's motive was that Kennedy intended to force him to retire in 1964.

Mark Lane, a lawyer who is the dean of the critics of the Warren Commission and the author of "Rush to Judgment," charges in his new book, "Plausible Denial: Was the C.I.A. Involved in the Assassination of J.F.K.?" (currently No. 5 on the New York Times hard-cover nonfiction best-seller list), that it was the C.I.A. that did it. The motive was that Kennedy had decided to destroy the agency.

Mr. Lane's chief source is Marita Lorenz. He identifies her as the daughter of "the captain of a West German luxury liner docked in the Havana harbor" on the day Fidel Castro took power in Cuba. Ms. Lorenz was 18 years old at the time. She met Castro when he visited the liner, became his lover, bore his child, defected to the United States, was recruited by the C.I.A. and trained to kill, set off for Cuba on a mission to poison Castro, changed her mind, had a reconciliation with Castro, returned to the United States and continued to work for the C.I.A. She talked to Mr. Lane about all this in 1977; he tried to make her account public but could not find anyone willing to publish it.

In 1985, Mr. Lane was involved in a suit brought by E. Howard Hunt, a former C.I.A. agent, against the Liberty Lobby, a conservative organization based in Washington. Mr. Hunt charged that the organization had libeled him in a story in its magazine that said he was in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, when Kennedy was murdered. Mr. Lane, as defense counsel for the Liberty Lobby, contacted Ms. Lorenz. She refused to appear in court, but she did agree to give a deposition. In it, she said she had helped run guns from Miami to Dallas the day before the assassination, that she had met with Mr. Hunt in a Dallas motel, that Mr. Hunt had given a large sum of cash to a C.I.A. agent, Frank Sturgis (later one of the burglars arrested in the Watergate break-in) and that Jack Ruby was also in the motel room.

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If that seems wild, Mr. Lane's concluding chapter quite takes your breath away. In it he suggests that in the early 60's, George Bush was a C.I.A. agent operating out of Houston, that he played an undefined but evidently major role in mounting the Bay of Pigs operation, that he had contacts with one George de Mohrenschildt, that "there is evidence suggesting that de Mohrenschildt served as a C.I.A. control officer who directed Oswald's actions," and that de Mohrenschildt was killed "from a gun shot just as he was about to be questioned by the House Select Committee on Assassinations."

Jim Garrison, the former New Orleans District Attorney who is the hero of Mr. Stone's movie, does

not implicate President Bush in his book "On the Trail of the Assassins" (currently No. 1 on the Times paperback nonfiction best-seller list). But he does charge that Kennedy's assassination was "a coup d'état . . . instigated and planned long in advance by fanatical anti-Communists in the . . . intelligence community . . . carried out . . . by individuals in the C.I.A.'s covert operations apparatus . . . and covered up by . . . the F.B.I., the Secret Service, the Dallas police department, and the military." The purpose of the coup "was to stop Kennedy from seeking détente with the Soviet Union and Cuba and ending the cold war" and to prevent him from withdrawing from Vietnam.

These theories, like Jell-O, appear to have some substance to them, but you can't hold them in your hand to examine them. They deal with the unanswered questions about the assassination by creating new ones. They posit conspiracies involving so many men that their meetings would have

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had to be held in Madison Square Garden. The authors insist that Lee Harvey Oswald was an agent of the C.I.A. (or the F.B.I. or military intelligence) and that he had at least one partner in Dallas. Who was that man? No author names him. It is all very frustrating, like reading a murder mystery that has no last chapter to tell who done it and how.

Robert J. Groden and Harrison Edward Livingstone, in "High Treason: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the New Evidence of Conspiracy" (No. 7 on this week's Times paperback nonfiction best-seller list) extend the conspiracy into the next decade by bringing in connections between conspirators who killed Kennedy and the men and Government agencies involved in the Watergate scandal and Richard Nixon's resignation as President in 1974. Another recent best seller, "Silent Coup: The Removal of the President" by Len Colodny and Robert Gettlin, also implicates the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the C.I.A. in bringing about Mr. Nixon's downfall.

If all or even some part of the above is true, we live in a world ruled by dark, sinister forces. Democracy is an opiate for the masses; a conspiracy of the rich and powerful actually rules. A combination of the C.I.A., the F.B.I., the M.I.C. and the Mafia makes the decisions and sees to the ruthless execution of them, whether that involves murdering a President (Kennedy) or driving one from office (Nixon) or going to all-out war in Vietnam. The conspiracy controls the major news media, especially CBS News, The Washington Post and The New York Times.

That millions of Americans have read these books or seen Mr. Stone's movie may tell us more about the attitude people have toward their Government and their educational experiences than it does about the Kennedy assassination. They believe that government is a conspiracy and that the history they were taught in school is all lie and myth.

Conspiracy theories are as old as history. Assassinations and wars are especially vulnerable to explanation by conspiracy. Every major assassination in our history has a conspiracy explanation, as do all our wars. For example, the War of 1812 was the result of a conspiracy led by Henry Clay to seize

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Canada. The Mexican War was brought on by a conspiracy of slaveholders, the Civil War by a conspiracy of fire-eaters from South Carolina, the Spanish-American War by a conspiracy led by Theodore Roosevelt and other budding imperialists, American entry into World War I by the "merchants of death," a cabal of bankers and manufacturers.

One persistent conspiracy theory holds that in December 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew that the Japanese were about to attack Pearl Harbor and deliberately kept that information from military commanders in Hawaii so that American forces there would suffer a humiliating defeat and a badly divided country would unite to back America's entry into World War II.

DRAMATIC or unhappy events often almost seem to bring forth a conspiracy thesis. The imposition of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe after World War II and the "loss" of China in 1949 led to the charge by the Republican junior Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph R. McCarthy, that these disasters were brought about by a conspiracy of Communist agents in the State Department. Things that never happened are fair game; the Canadian novelist James Bacque caused a worldwide sensation by charging in his 1989 book "Other Losses" that at the end of World War II Gen. Dwight Eisenhower entered into and carried out a conspiracy to starve to death as many as one million German prisoners of war, and then successfully covered up his crime for four decades.

Conspiratorial explanations for unwelcome or unsavory events are not limited to the United States. The most successful and significant conspiracy thesis of the 20th century came from post-World War I Germany. It held that the German Army had not been defeated at the front but "stabbed in the back" by Jews and Socialists at home. The stab-in-the-back legend played an important role in the Nazi seizure of power in 1933; Hitler seized that theme, trumpeting what must be the world's oldest conspiracy thesis, that the Jews secretly and malevolently rule the world.

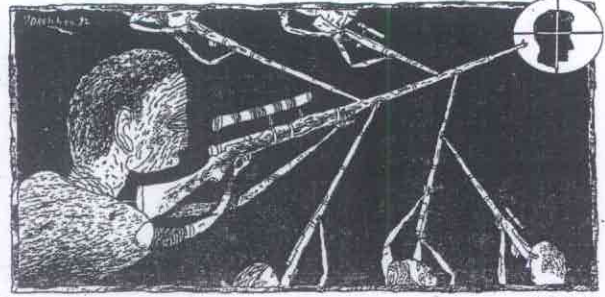
What explains the popularity of conspiracy theses? One obvious reason is that people are loath to believe that chance or accident can change world history; for example, it is almost unbearable to accept that such a miserable human being as Lee Harvey Oswald could have killed Kennedy all by himself. There must have been more to it.

There is often a political motive behind conspiracy theories. Both the left and the right use conspiracy explanations about the past to advance their causes in the present. In the case of World War I, for example, Americans on the left found it profitable to blame big business for the war, thus bolstering their argument that it was imperative to regulate the corporations. Conservatives struck back after December 1941, with the charges about Roosevelt and Pearl Harbor; for the most part, the men who made the charges hated F.D.R. and the New Deal. The political motives behind Senator McCarthy's charge that the Democratic Administrations of the 30's and 40's were riddled with Communists are obvious.

It seems a fair generalization to say that Oliver Stone and the authors of the recent works on the assassination hate the Vietnam War and hated those men who, in their view, brought it on and insisted on continuing it. They further believe that Kennedy was firmly committed to withdrawal, probably immediately after winning a second term in 1964.

That is a proposition that is open to debate only because we can never know what Kennedy might have done. We do know what his policies were, who were his advisers, and what was the general direction of his foreign policy. On the basis of what we do know, it seems unlikely at best that he would have followed a course much different from the one Lyndon Johnson pursued.

For many of the idealistic young people of the early 60's, the murder of Kennedy set off the worst decade of their lives. The idea that the 60's could have been far different has a tremendous attraction for these people. The assassination had an unmatched impact on their lives, private and public, then and forever after, whether they went to Vietnam or stayed home and protested. In their view, the conservatives and reactionaries and criminals got together to kill the last liberal president. These forces then took control of the country and continue to hold it. If Kennedy had lived, they believe, he would have smashed the F.B.I., the C.I.A. and the M.I.C., and he would have pulled out of Vietnam, promoted civil rights and generally made America more what they want it to be than



what Kennedy's successors built. A conspiracy thesis about Kennedy's murder makes a lovely fantasy.

There is more than fantasy, politics and prejudice involved in the persistence of conspiracy theses. Perhaps the chief reason

People are loath to believe that one miserable man, Lee Harvey Oswald, killed Kennedy all alone.

they are so widely believed is that so much of world history has been caused by conspiracies. Serbian officials, for example, were involved in a conspiracy in 1914 to assassinate the Austrian Archduke in Sarajevo. One can hardly count the number of times the throne of England has changed hands because of conspiracy. Conspiracies dominate the history of Russia and the Soviet Union.

Further, people believe conspiracy theses because governments lie and cover up so much and so often. By the time Representative Richard Nixon proved that Alger Hiss was a perjurer, for example, almost every

high official in President Harry S. Truman's Administration knew Hiss was a Communist, but from Truman on down they denied it. Nixon's lies about the cover-up of Watergate are another obvious example. The brazenness of the lies told by leaders is often in direct proportion to the degree of guilt — Hitler and the Reichstag fire, Stalin and the massacre of the Polish officer corps in the Katyn forest, Kennedy and American involvement in the Bay of Pigs, President Ronald Reagan and the swapping of arms to Iran for hostages, and countless others. It is because people are so often lied to by their governments that they say "I wouldn't put anything past those guys" and mean it.

In the case of the Kennedy assassination, there is another, all-but-compelling reason to believe there was a conspiracy. It is the extreme weakness of the "single bullet" theory on which the "lone gunman" conclusion rests, together with the obvious political motives of the Warren Commission (the need to quickly reassure the public that there was no conspiracy, no political coup d'état, no F.B.I. or C.I.A. involvement) and combined with the continued withholding of evidence (some of which is under seal until 2029). In 1979 the House Select Committee on Assassinations declared that Kennedy "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy." Taken altogether, the reasons to doubt the official

explanation are sufficient for sensible people to find these conspiracy books compelling if not convincing.

David S. Lifton's "Best Evidence: Disguise and Deception in the Assassination of John F. Kennedy" (1980) adds to the doubts about the Warren Commission's conclusion. Mr. Lifton argues that the conspirators who killed Kennedy got possession of Kennedy's body somewhere between Dallas and Washington, then removed his brain and otherwise altered his boy and wounds to support a single-gunman theory. Mr. Lifton's account of how this was done is almost impossible to follow, almost impossible to believe and almost impossible to refute. He has photographs that certainly appear to support his case.

So how does one make a judgment about which conspiracy thesis is true, which not? Sometimes the thesis sinks because of its obvious absurdity — for example, McCarthy's charge that Secretaries of State Dean Acheson and George Marshall, along with President Truman, were part of a Communist conspiracy. But only a handful of scholars have the time or training to read intelligently everything printed on Roosevelt and Pearl Harbor, or the Kennedy assassination, or Watergate.

But beyond the details, all conspiracy theories must be put to the test of common-sense questions. About Pearl Harbor one must ask: Could Roosevelt, by himself, have kept information about an imminent attack from the commanders in Hawaii? Of course not.