

Historians, Buffs and Crackpots

By John G. Leyden

YOU'VE SEEN the movie "JFK"; now you want to read the book. The question is which book? The list is almost endless—a recent Life magazine article put the number of books about the Nov. 22, 1963, assassination of President John F. Kennedy at "more than 600." There's even an entire book about the rifle Lee Harvey Oswald used to kill the president.

What follows is a roundup, by no means complete, of some of the books—both pro and anti-conspiracy—that have been written about the Kennedy assassination. Many of the assassination books are out of print, including some of the earlier ones listed here. Readers can try libraries, but a word of caution: Even the Library of Congress doesn't have them all. And requests for those it supposedly has frequently come back marked "Not on Shelf."

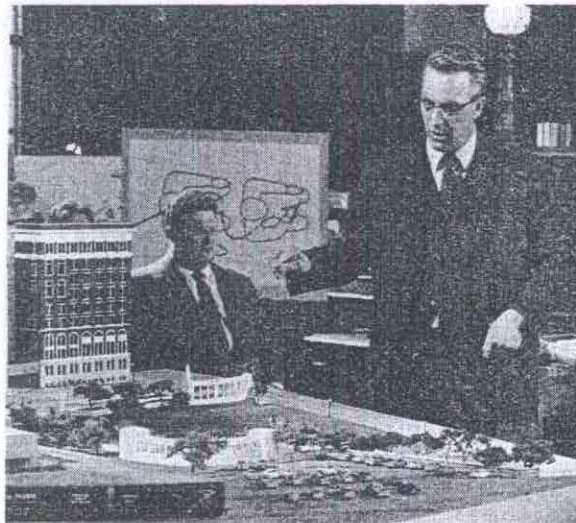
Whether you believe, as I do, that Oswald acted alone, or are convinced that there was a conspiracy, or simply are curious and want to know more—don't expect the research to come easy. The conspiracy books, in particular, make for a difficult read, since many lack a narrative flow and jump from premise to premise and from point to point. One notable exception is Jim Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins*, which reads like a mystery novel where the names are the same but the facts have been changed. That book—with Jim Marr's *Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy*—is reported to have inspired Oliver Stone, and one can see how Stone might have been intrigued by the dramatic possibilities. But had Stone begun by reading David Lifton's turgid *Best Evidence*, for example, he might have thrown in the towel after the first or second chapter, and the country would have been spared the renewed debate over who killed Kennedy. These three books have all been issued in paperback, and should be readily available on the shelves of many local bookstores.

Also readily available in paperback are a number of other popular books that allege a conspiracy, such as *High Treason* by Robert Groden and Harrison Livingstone, as well as an "Oswald-acted-alone" book, *Conspiracy of One* by Jim Moore. With little effort, one might also dig up a couple of recent hardbacks, David Belin's defense of the Warren Commission, *Final Disclosure*, and Mark North's *Act of Treason: The Role of J. Edgar Hoover in the Assassination of President Kennedy*.

And Mark Lane has a new book out, too, *Plausible Denial*, pointing the finger of suspicion at the CIA. It's at least his fourth trip to the well on the JFK assassination, including the 1966 best seller, *Rush to Judgment*, and another book, which was clearly labeled fiction, *Executive Action*.

BUT THE obvious starting point for anyone interested in knowing more about the Kennedy assassination is the 1964 Warren Commission Report, which

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Actor Kevin Costner as Jim Garrison in Oliver Stone's movie, "JFK"

can be found in most libraries or in good second-hand book stores. The Warren Commission, of course, found that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, killed Kennedy and Dallas police officer J.D. Tippit and that, then, Jack Ruby, acting on impulse, killed Oswald. The report was intended to resolve public doubts about the president's murder, but the voluminous testimony and materials collected during the investigation only served to fuel debate. The conspiracy-minded could use the commission's own archives to support any theory that struck their fancy.

In 1966, several books were published that raised questions about the Warren Commission report. The most influential was Edward Jay Epstein's *Inquest*. The book focused public attention on the commission's shortcomings and charged, among other things, that the staff had failed to investigate fully the possibility of a second assassin. At the same time, however, Epstein found that "a prima facie case" existed for Oswald's involvement in the murders of both Kennedy and Tippit and dismissed out of hand the idea that Oswald had been framed for the crimes.

Epstein also wrote *Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald and Counterplot*, an exposé of the Garrison investigation. In *Legend*, published in 1978, Epstein amended some of his earlier criticism of the Warren Commission Report, stating that he believed the bullets were fired from the Texas School Book Depository, though he still contended that it was "logically impossible" to rule out the presence of a second gunman.

Other critics, such as Mark Lane, have not been as charitable in their interpretations of the commission's findings. Their charges of a massive cover-up eventually helped prompt a new investigation by the House of Representatives' Select Committee on Assassinations. However, the December 1978 committee report satisfied almost no one, and copies are difficult to find.

On the one hand, the report said that Oswald had killed both Kennedy and Tippit, and it validated most of the other major Warren Commission findings, including the controversial "single bullet" theory. At the

same time, it threw the assassination buffs a bone by concluding—on the basis of a hotly disputed Dallas police recording—that a second gunman and "co-conspirator" probably fired an errant fourth shot at the president from the area of the grassy knoll in Dealy Plaza. (This conclusion later was challenged by a National Academy of Sciences acoustics panel.)

The committee's conspiracy finding actually resulted from a last-minute change that many critics say was the work of Chief Counsel G. Robert Blakey to accommodate the possibility of involvement by organized crime figures. Indeed, in 1981, Blakey published *The Plot to Kill the President*, which concluded that "elements of organized crime" participated in the assassination plot. Others also have picked up on this theme, including David Scheim, in *Contract on America*, and John Davis in *Mafia Kingfish: Carlos Marcello and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy*.

THE FIRST generation of assassination writers tended to present rather simplified conspiracy theories. For example, Thomas Buchanan saw the assassination as a means of preserving the oil depletion allowances in *Who Killed Kennedy?* (1964) and Leo Sauvage viewed it as part of a racist plot to maintain white supremacy in America in *The Oswald Affair* (1966). The Soviet Union was another popular suspect (along with Castro's Cuba), and English writer Michael Eddowes took it to extremes by arguing in *The Oswald File* that the real Oswald was replaced by a KGB "double" not long after his 1959 defection. Eddowes's allegations prompted Oswald's exhumation in 1981, only to have the medical examiner verify the authenticity of the remains in blunt, unequivocal language.

Most of the contemporary crop of assassination writers have a more global view and tend to mix and match their conspiracy theories according to the latest fashion. The only consistent element throughout is the alleged involvement of the CIA.

Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins*, for example, blames rogue CIA elements and their "extra-governmental collabo-

rators," the FBI, the Secret Service, the Dallas police and the U.S. military, all of whom wanted to keep peace from breaking out. At the same time, Garrison went to considerable lengths to exonerate organized crime from any involvement.

Jim Marr's *Crossfire*, on the other hand, claims that Kennedy was killed "in a military-style ambush orchestrated by organized crime" with government backing. He even implies that Vice President Lyndon Johnson may have given tacit approval. Kennedy's "public execution," he adds, was intended to serve as a sort of object lesson to the nation not to mess with the military-industrial complex.

In *High Treason*, Robert Groden and Harrison Livingstone sound another familiar theme of the assassination buffs. They suggest that the murders of John and Robert Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., together with the shooting of George Wallace, are all related. They also said that Watergate was "intimately connected" to the assassinations (Did you know Nixon was in Dallas on the day JFK was shot?) and repeated allegations that Watergate figure G. Gordon Liddy may have poisoned former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to keep him quiet.

David Lifton could win the prize (if one were given) as the most imaginative writer among the current crop, although some might argue that the plot for *Best Evidence* was borrowed from the cult film "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." Lifton became convinced at an early age, watching the famous Abraham Zapruder film of the assassination, that the fatal shots came from the front of the president's Dallas motorcade and has spent virtually his entire adult life trying to prove it.

Rather than arguing that the official autopsy photos and X-rays are fakes, as others have done, Lifton alleges that Kennedy's body was taken from Air Force One, surgically altered to make it look as if the fatal shots came from the rear, and then put back in the casket at the Bethesda Naval Hospital before the autopsy began. However, in 1988, when the PBS "Nova" series brought four of the doctors who treated Kennedy at Dallas Parkland Hospital to Washington to view the official X-rays and autopsy photos, none could find any evidence of altered wounds.

Where does Oswald fit in all these theories? Well, many conspiracy writers have reduced him to a walk-on role. David Scheim, for example, ignores him almost completely in *Contract on America*, noting that "his marksmanship was marginal and he had no apparent motive to kill President Kennedy."

Compared to the conspiracy scenarios, the books by David Belin (*Final Disclosure*) and Jim Moore (*Conspiracy of One*) are pretty tame stuff. Both support the "lone assassin" theory and their books devote considerable space to point-by-point rebuttals of its critics.

However, former Warren Commission lawyer Belin now concedes that the commission invited public distrust of its final report by conducting most of its work in secret and deciding to withhold the publication of the X-rays and autopsy photographs in deference to the Kennedy family. He also severely criticizes the CIA and the National Security Council for their lack of cooperation in the investigation.

Still, he has no doubt that the Commission was right in naming Oswald as the lone assassin and is confident that history eventually will sustain that judgment. "The truth has a long fuse," he added hopefully, "and ultimately it prevails." ■