

By Pete Karman

Cockburn's conspiracy folly and the Warren omission

ONE OF THE FEW THINGS MOST Americans agree about is that the Warren Commission was hiding the truth when it decreed, for the obvious and admitted purpose of calming the country, that ex-Marine Lee Harvey Oswald alone killed John Kennedy for no good reason and that he in turn was killed by gangster Jack Ruby for no bad reason.

Americans have more hands-on experience with guns and crime than most other people in the world. Accordingly, they quickly rejected the WC's ludicrous tale that Oswald used a misaligned, sticky-bolted, \$20 popgun to commit a magical feat of murder for motives perforce unconnected to his personal history and associations.

Whatever the truth was, it wasn't that.

The killings in the '60s of JFK, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy and a cemetery full of lesser known political figures and activists in fact served the purpose, as Voltaire gracefully put it in *Candide*, of encouraging others in their behavior.

Judicious mischief: All governments and coercive power structures reserve the right to destroy those who challenge the status quo. If they do it judiciously and mostly to foreigners, miscreants or the lower classes, we judge them to be moderate. If they do it to each other, as in the case of the Kennedys, we start to worry about the strength and stability of power. And that can bring even more challenges, such as those posed by the rebellious '60s generation.

So when power resorts to murderous house cleaning, it is obliged to send out a dual message. The first is the admonitory one that those who get out of line get whacked, and the second is the reassuring one that there's no threat to business as usual.

Most Americans, with the exception of a few liberals and school children, understand this perfectly. You may be certain that the people who live in John Gotti's neighborhood do.

The Warren Commission's report on JFK's killing was the carrier of the first message, that of warning. Its very sloppiness, incoherence, internal contradictions and anomalous conclusions announced to the country that the emperor was clothed and that the peasants had better believe it, or else. After all, what good is power if it cannot be used outside the constraints of common sense, logic and decency?

It was left to the house journalists of power to reassure the public. They told us that the best and safest thing to do, for ourselves and for the country, was to file and forget the report and go about our business. Be cynical, they allowed, but behave.

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Anthony Lewis of the *New York Times*, the world's fastest reader, was among these reassurers. A few hours after the WC's vast, unindexed, 26 volume, 20,000 page compendium of hearings and exhibits was published in 1964 he wrote that it "overwhelmingly supported" the case for Oswald's singular guilt.

The purpose was accomplished, the nation moved on. Until the jarring big bucks, big promo, Oliver

JFK

Stone movie *JFK* came along at Christmas time, no one believed the Warren Commission, but no one challenged it except for a cottage industry of researchers and scholars who could easily be dismissed as kooks and buffs. On the other side, only a few scattered oddballs felt constrained, for evidently subjective reasons, to defend the Warren Commission.

Malign neglect: There was Lewis, of course, and a couple of his colleagues at the *Times* who covered the event and found their dull dotages threatened by intimations that the political system that they loyally characterized as ultimately benign and self-correcting was in fact murderously corrupt.

There's Dan Rather of CBS, who made his rep covering the killing, and who's been subject to rumors ever since about special knowledge he may have about the event and its relationship, if any, to his career.

There's FBI informant Gerald Ford, the only surviving member of the commission, who was subsequently made famous by Chevy Chase. And, now, there's also Alexander Cockburn, the last of the journalistic Stalinists not to have passed on to Zionism or Majorca.

In *The Nation* of March 9, Cockburn jostled with *JFK* screenwriter Zachary Sklar and professors Peter Dale Scott and Michael Parenti about whether Kennedy was killed by his own ilk because he was about to bail out of Vietnam. This is the main motive for murder put forth in *JFK*, a movie the Vietnam-centered Stone frankly admits is a counter-myth to the official myth.

The exchange amounted to leftist nitpicking informed by Hollywood reductionism. It glossed the sensible thesis suggested by the evidence that Kennedy was not killed for one big reason by one small cabal, but that the murder was the result of a wide consensus of would-be, sideline and actual conspirators. But, of course, you can't make or even talk about movies in ways that match the complexities of real life.

Then they wouldn't be movies.

Among those with the motive and means to kill Kennedy were military brass hats, people in the FBI and the various intelligence services, organized crime, local and foreign oil and business interests, political rivals, Cuban exiles and right-wing nuts. These, of course, are intermingled rather than discrete categories. As we know from the present occupant of the White House (whose name, home address and business number was found in the personal phone book of George de Mohrenschildt, Lee Harvey Oswald's putative CIA babysitter) busy people interest themselves in many areas for varied reasons. Cockburn's snide but cogent position in this odd exchange in *The Nation* was that Kennedy was a nasty cold warrior not about to abort the growing war in Vietnam. His Stalinism slipped through, however, when he gratuitously added that the movie's "lies," "myths" and "manipulations" could only undermine "the mass movements of tomorrow." Pompous, but still he could have left it at that. Then again, maybe he couldn't.

An article of the Stalinist faith is that tomorrow's promise is the best defense for today's squalor. And thus Cockburn proceeded from denouncing the defeatist notions of the left to announcing a few pages later in his own "Beat the Devil" column his acceptance of the decrepit notions of the right.

Dead men don't: He was joining Gerald Ford and the dead Warren Commission in pinning the rap on dead Lee Harvey, the Annie Oakley of the *Twilight Zone*. It amounted to a farcical replay of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. No doubt we will learn in the promised future, if not in his next column, the secret wisdom and political correctness of Cockburn's course.

Cockburn's vehicle of change was a sponge ball interview with Warren Commission lawyer Wesley J. Liebeler. It's axiomatic in journalism that interviewees with specific knowledge gear their answers to the perceived cognizance of their interviewers. Liebeler chose to handle Cockburn on the *Weekly Reader* level and Cockburn chose to raise his hand before addressing the teacher. A UCLA law professor, Liebeler's an interesting character with a reputation as a gadfly and a cynic. His Warren Commission directive was to investigate the assassin, meaning no one else but Oswald. And that's exactly the subject Cockburn's interview did not cover.

It consisted rather of giveaway questions and throwaway answers, starting with a Cockburn mood set-

ter about "the speed at which Oswald would have to fire his *Mannlicher-Carcano*."

In fact, no legal chain of evidence ties Oswald to any rifle and a variety of witnesses put him in the lunch room of the Texas School Depository 10-15 minutes before and less than 2 minutes after the shooting.

Cockburn then graciously indulged Liebeler's specialty of automatically discounting all of the hundreds of ear- and eyewitness testimonies recorded by the commission and independent researchers as inherently unreliable. Says Liebeler, we can only trust replicable evidence such as autopsy photos, X-rays and ballistics tests. Of course, no mention was made of the fact that these items also lacked legal standing and credibility because of endless instances of tampering, misplacement.

Take, for example, the "magic" or "pristine" bullet, surely the world's most important one-third of an ounce of lead. On it rides the single shooter construct and the very notion of what constitutes truth and reality in late 20th-century America. The chief engineer at Parkland Hospital in Dallas said he found a bullet on one stretcher, and the Warren Commission, presumably for reasons of national comity, told him and us that he found it on another.

Doctors and FBI witnesses at the autopsy that night 1,200 miles away in Bethesda also reported finding and examining an intact bullet at the time the Parkland bullet was in the charge of the Secret Service. That's one bullet more than the Oswald-did-it yarn can accommodate. And, in any event, no test has ever been able to come close to showing that such a bullet could do as much damage to bone and flesh as claimed without significant deformation. It would be a waste of space and a caption rehash of massive amounts of easily available evidence to address the fallacies in the column any further.

Why is columnist Alexander Cockburn beating a dead horse and kissing the devil?

Cockburn's interview is old crap in an old crock. Liebeler concluded it appropriately by asking rhetorically, "So how the hell do I know why Oswald killed the president?" As a saving grace for *The Nation*, the column was impishly sabotaged by a small drawing of two torsos with a dotted line arrow running through them labeled "to gun."

Nothing in particular: Virtually the whole world comprehends quite rightly that John F. Kennedy was shot to death as the result of concerted actions by individuals with the requisite power, resources, technique and influence to carry out and cover up that crime.

Their motives, which were several and complementary, are known or easily deduced by the circumstances and outcome of the event. The only things that are not and, almost assuredly, never will be learned are the names and specific roles of those who directed and carried out the killing.

The world knows this partly by common sense inference and partly by the mountain of evidence accumulated by a small army of researchers and scholars that give a thousand and one lies to the thin and manipulative tale of Oswald and Ruby as unattached assassins.

The world also knows that the message of the Warren Commission, its old partisans like Lewis and his new ones like Cockburn, is trust us or else, there's less here than meets the eye. That's the opposite of critical thought, not to mention journalism.

Wesley J. Liebeler gave several grownup interviews years back to David S. Litton, who was then preparing *Best Evidence*, one of the core books on the Kennedy conspiracy. Here's how Litton recounts one exchange:

"What about the evidence?" I asked. "What would happen when I published a documented account showing that the legal record itself showed evidence that the body was altered?" "Well I don't think that anybody will ever believe anything you say," replied Liebeler. "Why not?" I asked. "Because it's relatively unbelievable. You know...there comes a point where, after all, the emperor may rely on his power to demand that he is clothed. And this is not only a function of power; it's also a function of relative probability, and a concession to the shortness of life." Liebeler continued:

"The unconscious notion that the emperor will be clothed is a very powerful notion to rely on...Let me put it this way: Even if you were right, which I don't think you are, I think I could beat you in the argument." "How," I asked.

"Because of the presumption that the emperor is clothed."

The new mystery is why Alexander Cockburn is beating a dead horse and kissing the devil. ■