

THE POLITICAL Rorschach Test

By Jefferson Morley

WASHINGTON

How we make sense of the assassination of John F. Kennedy is directly related to how we make sense of American public life. To explain how the President of the United States came to have his head blown off in broad daylight, we must choose among the millions of available facts. The choices we make—to accept the credibility of the Warren Commission, which concluded a lone gunman was to blame, or to believe eyewitnesses who heard gunshots coming from the grassy knoll, and so decide more people were involved—are shaped, consciously and unconsciously, by our premises about the U.S. government and the way power is exercised in America.

The events of Nov. 22, 1963, have thus become a kind of national Rorschach test of the American political psyche. Those six seconds of gunfire in Dallas' Dealey Plaza serve as an enigmatic ink blot into which we read our political concerns.

The history of the Kennedy assassination in the American imagination is a chronicle of shifting hopes and fears. In Kennedy's death, Americans have seen a cathartic test of national resilience or a paranoid nightmare of triumphant corruption. The controversy over "JFK," Oliver Stone's coming feature film, is only the latest chapter in this story.

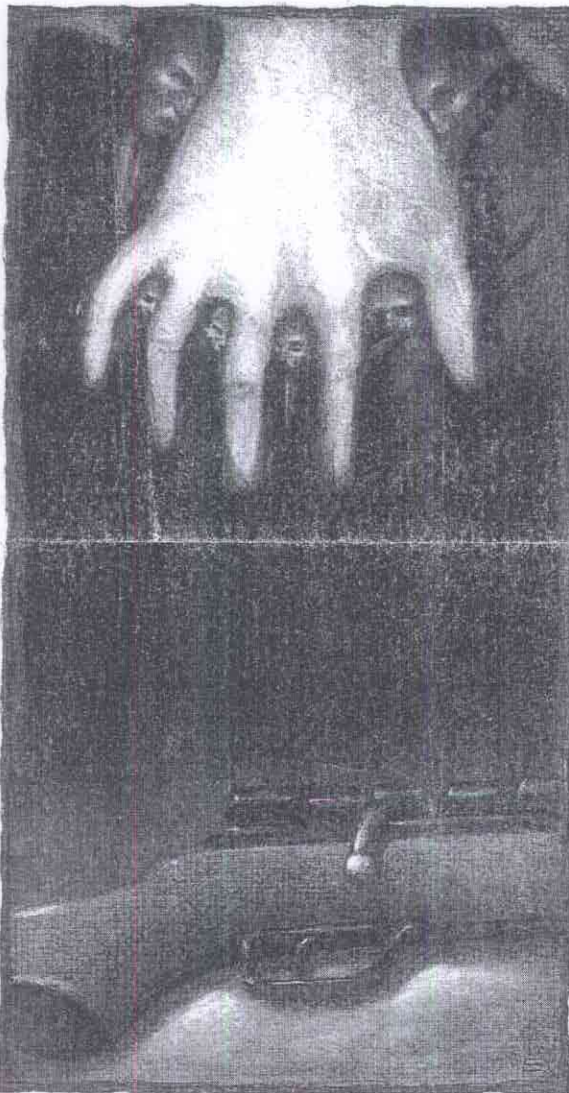
The central issue is conspiracy. The notion that unknown conspirators murdered Kennedy took root quickly. In the spring of 1964, one-third of Americans believed Lee Harvey Oswald acted in concert with others. Within two years, the figure had doubled. Every poll taken over the last quarter century has shown between 60% to 80% of the public favoring a conspiratorial explanation. Director Stone only exaggerated slightly when he told Washington reporters recently, "More people have claimed to see a five Elvis than claim to believe in the Warren Commission."

The fear of conspiracy is a long-running theme in American life. In the 1830s and 1840s, there was a pervasive mistrust of secret societies, such as the Masons. In 1919, and again in the late 1940s and early 1950s, there were popular fears of communist conspiracy. The conspiracy theories of the Kennedy assassination that emerged in the mid-1960s are part of this tradition. Unaccountable forces are seen lurking behind the facade of democratic government. The official explanation of public events is considered incomplete, if not deceptive. The conspiracy theories of Kennedy's death, however improbable, reveal the tradition of mistrust of the established order.

That's no small part of the reason why Stone and conspiracy theorists are criticized so fiercely today. Those who believe Oswald acted alone are not only defending the anti-conspiratorial theory advanced by the Warren Commission. They are also defending the credibility of senior U.S. government officials, the integrity of U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies and the capabilities of the national media. (If there was a conspiracy, the media has thus far failed to uncover it.) The lone-gunner theory of Kennedy's death, in its own way no less implausible than some of the conspiracy

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What Americans think about the Kennedy assassination reveals what they think about their government



DAVID SHANNON / for The Times

theories, depends on confidence in the legitimacy of national political authority.

For 25 years, the imaginative recreation of the Kennedy assassination has been a way to explore the twin issues of confidence and conspiracy in U.S. history. At first, confidence seemed to hold the upper hand. In the aftermath of the assassination, there was a string of best-selling novels, including "Night of Camp David" and "The President's Plane is Missing," which turned on mortal peril to the President. In these optimistic narratives, the President (or his successor) was an attractive, pragmatic liberal in the Kennedy mold. Dangerous forces—racism, insanity, the nuclear arms race—conspired against him, and the country was plunged into a crisis of confidence. But the fictional President prevailed and national well-being was restored.

Official organs, no less than novelists, sought to reassure the public about the assassination. The National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson after the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, presented a psychological profile of assassins emphasizing their alienation and sexual dysfunction. The report stressed the "critical importance" of maintaining an "overwhelming sense of the legitimacy of our government and institutions." It suggested that doubts about the lone gunmen were "a product of the primal anxieties created by the archetypal crime of parricide—not the inadequacy of the evidence of the lone assassin."

Then, in the early '70s, came revelations about John Kennedy's mistresses and Mafia connections, about Watergate conspirators and machinations of the Central Intelligence Agency. The idea that criminal associations, murderous plots and orchestrated deceit might characterize the highest levels of U.S. government was shown to be plausible, if not realistic. Fear of conspiracy was legitimized. The Kennedy assassination became the inspiration for a darker vision of U.S. public life, especially in Hollywood.

Alan Pakula's paranoid thriller "The Parallax View" (1975) reworked the Kennedy assassination into liberal myth. Joseph Frady, a newspaper reporter played by Warren Beatty, stumbles onto the mysterious corporation that has assassinated a promising Kennedy-style politician. Frady's boss is poisoned, a friend's houseboat is firebombed. When Frady figures out where the next assassination will take place, he tries to intervene, only to be killed and posthumously framed as the assassin himself. The movie closes with a Warren Commission-style tribunal ruling that Frady was "confused," and any speculation that he did not act alone is conspiracy mongering. "Parallax View" was a model of liberal paranoia—a corporate monolith dedicated to murdering progressive hope and pinning the blame on the lone man who knew the truth.

"Taxi Driver" (1976), directed by Martin Scorsese, was also essentially about the Kennedy assassination. The title character, Travis Bickle, is, like Lee Harvey Oswald, an ex-Marine. Superficially, he fits the profile of an assassin as developed by the National Commission on Violence—a misfit driven to kill by resentment, envy and mental instability. But, Bickle, as played by Robert DeNiro, is a man recoiling from the degradation of a permissive society. When he tries to

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help a young prostitute get off the streets, she spouts clichés of liberation. When he develops a crush on a pretty campaign worker, he discovers that she believes in her candidate, a handsome Kennedy-like fraud who does little more than intone meaningless slogans. Travis stalks the candidate but is thwarted by the Secret Service. He then turns on the Young prostitute's pimp and customers and, after a bloody rampage, winds up a hero in the tabloids. In "Taxi Driver," a decadent America gets the assassin it deserves. In 1977, the House of Representatives

responded to the pervasive mood of cynicism about government by reopening the investigation of the Kennedy assassination. In 1979, the House Special Committee on Assassinations concluded that unknown conspirators were responsible—a finding that only compounded the cynicism. "Next thing you know," glibbed Johnny Carson, "they'll be blaming World War II on Hitler."

With the Reagan era came a new mood of confidence—at least among Washington's political elite. In 1983, one former aide to Robert Kennedy declared "We are done with debunking." Yet the public

remained skeptical as ever about the assassination. A 1983 Washington Post/ABC News poll found 80% of Americans believed more than one person was responsible for Kennedy's murder.

But Kennedy's masculine style and aggressive foreign policy were back in vogue. Critical examination of the underside of his presidency was increasingly viewed as another passe form of liberal self-flagellation. The Times re-examined the Warren Commission and pronounced the lone gunman theory persuasive. The commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the assassination, unlike the 10th or

15th, was heavy on nostalgia about Kennedy's Camelot, light on speculation about the assassination.

However, by 1988, the 25th anniversary of the conspiracy theme was reasserting itself. The Iran-Contra affair revealed an oddly familiar extra-legal conspiracy featuring assassination manuals and anti-Castro Cubans, as well as a presidential commission of inquiry that did its best to avoid the unseemly truth. Don DeLillo's best-selling novel, "Talora," portrayed Oswald as the willing and unwitting tool of anti-communist conspirators enraged by Kennedy's betrayal at the Bay

of Pigs. "What has become unraveled since Dallas," DeLillo wrote in 1988, "is not the plot, of course, not the dense mass of character and events, but the sense of a coherent reality."

The imaginative recreation of the Kennedy assassination from the pot-boiler novels of the '60s to Stone's "JFK" is a ceaseless quest to restore that sense of coherent reality to the American story. The crime of the century remains unresolved less because we don't know who fired the fatal shots than because there is no agreement whether the story of the Kennedy assassination should be invested with confidence in our national institutions or with fears of conspiratorial

er.