



The Assassination

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There is something ugly and monstrous moving around in America. I heard it this summer on two coasts, and in towns in between. It comes up at parties and in bars and in all the other places where people gather. It is a theory—awful and murderous—and when it comes up it burns brilliantly for a while, and then is suddenly dropped, as if its possibilities were too terrible to go into any further. All of it is about the assassination of John Kennedy. And the theory says that somehow, in some way, Lyndon Baines Johnson was responsible.

That is where all of the talk about the assassination is starting to lead. Fewer and fewer people are buying the Warren Report theory that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in killing the President. Most of the talk you hear indicates that many Americans believe that a second assassin was involved. The blizzard of books on the subject has only added detail and some evidence to what before had been a vague, uneasy feeling.

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It was the contention of the Warren Commission that a single slug fired by Oswald slammed into the President's back, exited at his neck and then ripped through Texas Gov. John Connally's chest, wrist and thigh. But after all those collisions the bullet fired from Oswald's Mannlicher-Carcano rifle was in remarkably good condition. It was nearly whole, its nose just bruised, its body marked only by riflings.

In addition there were more than three grains of metal in Connally's wrist wounds alone, while, as Mark Lane writes in "Rush to Judgment," the bullet that hit Kennedy and Connally emerged only 1.4 to 2.4 grains lighter than a normal unfired bullet of the same type.

The initial reports from Parkland Hospital said Kennedy had been hit in the throat, and the few photographs do show him clutching his throat before the third bullet smashed into his head and killed him. But if he indeed had been hit first in the throat, there would have to have been another man with a gun. The Commission says there wasn't. Today, more and more people have ceased believing the Commission.

So the conspiracy theories are with us again. If you can be persuaded that a second assassin existed, you must believe in a conspiracy, because the odds against getting two maniacs working together are simply too long. If there was a second assassin, he has long since become part of a dam somewhere. But the people who set the plan in motion would still be alive.

So what do you have? Oswald lived awhile in Russia, believed in fair play for Castro, was known as a kind of village leftist. But it is difficult to imagine what the left wing would have to gain in shooting President Kennedy. The Cold War was rapidly thawing; no one wanted to invade Cuba very much; there was a new social awakening in America. Even Khrushchev wept.

But then a Right-Wing Conspiracy doesn't sound correct either. The right wing is made up of a bunch of basically decent people mourning a lost America, spiced by some real nuts. They would have been immediate suspects, and would have been investigated in minute detail. They might have had the motive of hate, but I wonder if that is really enough.

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You are left with two theories. I still believe that Oswald, acting on his own, killed Kennedy. The Warren Commission Report has become a discredited piece of goods, but that does not mean that the conclusion could not be sound.

It is the presence of the other, darker theory in this country that is troubling. It asks, again and again, who had the most to gain? The name that is never mentioned, but is always hinted at with broad stage mannerisms is that of Lyndon Johnson.

This theory comes out of a literary reading of history, I suppose, the old desire for all things wrapped in a neat, tight package. You are thus presented with a blend of fact and fiction that makes everything as neat as a movie version of life.

You are given a man whose lust for power is acknowledged even by his friends. He is a man who served under a President who had never treated him with the respect he believed he deserved. He is a man who almost eagerly accepted the nomination for Vice President in 1960, in circumstances which are still not altogether clear. He is a man who has wanted to be President all of his life but, after surviving one heart attack, finds himself looking into a future of at least eight Kennedy years.

A plot is developed, supposedly by Texas business interests worried about losing their oil depletion allowances. Lyndon is, or is not, informed, but is told to get Kennedy to Dallas. Lyndon, in fact, insists that Kennedy go, and afterwards he is sworn in.

It is an ugly, monstrous story, because it suggests that a great country has been led this past 1,000 days by a co-conspirator of assassins. But the theory is being related, and could be one, among many hidden reasons, why the President's popularity is dropping.

More importantly, the existence of such a theory demands that the entire assassination be once again thrown open to investigation. In their drive toward calm and consensus, the politicians on the Commission played loosely with the details of truth. Now we end up with murderous theories. No country can exist with theories like this becoming general. And the Warren Commissions, unfortunately, has not done enough to settle them.