

iving Arts

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Fueling the who-killed-JFK fire

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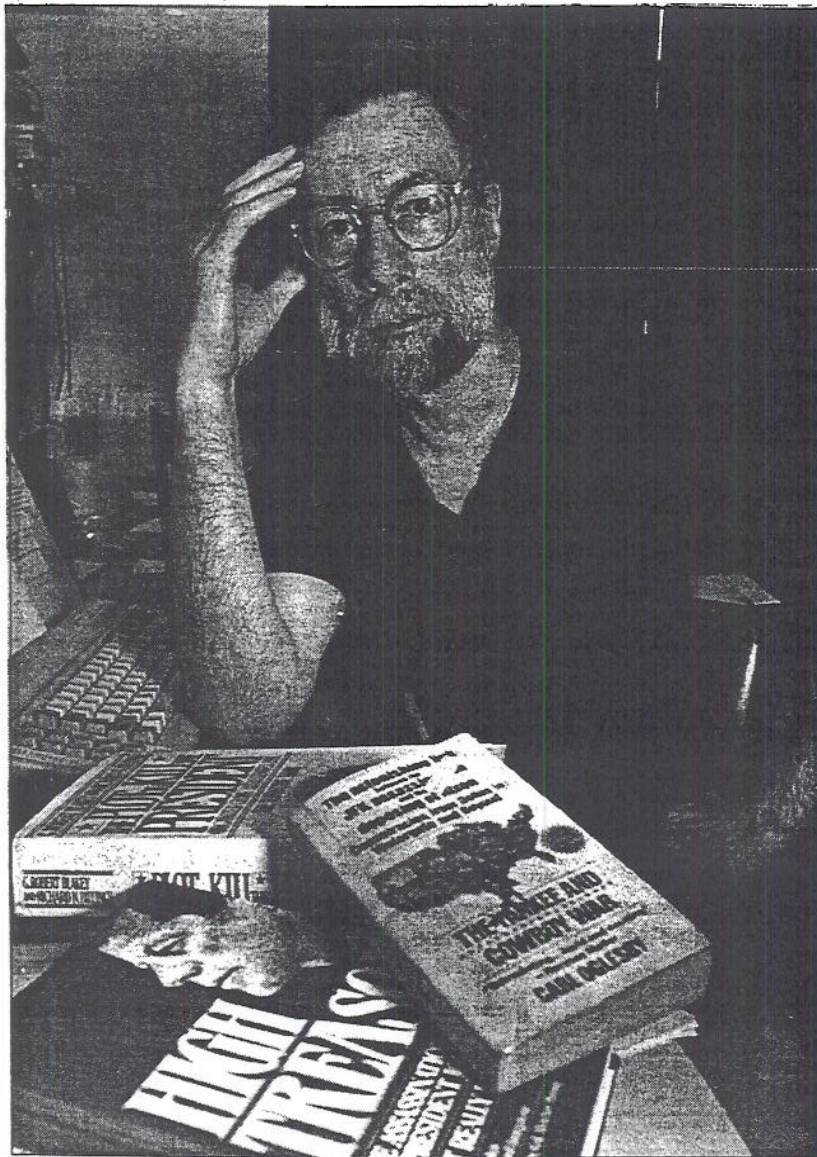
That faint buzz you hear echoing from Boston to Berkeley is the hum of the JFK assassination network, busily digesting the latest morsels of information that might add a dramatic new chapter to one of American history's most baffling mysteries.

While a quarter-century of dogged investigation has left their ranks depleted and their hopes for a definitive solution largely frustrated, the conspiracy buffs and Grassy Knoll scholars still react hungrily to fresh news, if not fresh clues, about who really killed President John F. Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963, in Dallas — and why.

It happened again in Texas earlier this week, when a 29-year-old unemployed oil-equipment salesman named Ricky Don White told reporters that his deceased father, former Dallas policeman Roscoe White, had been part of a three-man JFK hit squad — and, he also claims, the gunman who killed Officer J.D. Tippit after his arrest of accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald. White based his allegations on a missing diary of his father's he now believes was stolen by the FBI, as well as cables sent to Roscoe White by the CIA, his purported employer. A CIA spokesman in Washington immediately (and vehemently) denied the link.

Whatever truth may lie in White's charges — and the jury is not only still out on this one, it has barely been empaneled — the mere fact that they *have* been aired has been enough to remobilize the network. And the more that network vibrates, the more likely it seems that White will soon be exposed as a hero, a charlatan, a pawn in others' hands — or perhaps some bizarre combination of all three.

How many amateur sleuths continue to follow the evidentiary trail is hard to say. At the Assassination Archives and
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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / JOHN TUMACHI

Carl Oglesby thinks Ricky White's story is "almost certainly a hoax."

Grist for the who-killed-JFK mill

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Research Center in Washington, where more than 200 books and a million pages of other material relating to the assassination are kept on hand, vice president James Lesar says he fielded 50 to 60 calls from members "wanting to know what we know" about Ricky White. According to Lesar, the AARC currently has about 500 dues-paying members.

Two years ago, on the 25th anniversary of the Dallas tragedy, it was estimated that fewer than 1,000 assassination buffs remained active — down considerably from the heady days of the late '60s and early '70s, when the Warren Commission Report and Watergate had thousands of skeptics seeing government conspiracies behind every tree. Many abandoned their own investigations after a congressional committee spent more than two years and \$2.5 million reexamining the JFK data, finally concluding that Kennedy had "probably" been the victim of a conspiracy. No other gunmen were named, however, and no indictments handed down. Meanwhile, the number of newsletters and hot lines has dwindled.

Still, at least some vestiges of the old assassination-ologist network remain intact. One respected veteran is Cambridge writer Carl Oglesby, a founding member of the now defunct Assassination Information Bureau and a man with dozens of conspiracy buffs on his Rolodex. While working on an updated version of his FBI vs. CIA book "The Yankee and the Cowboy War," Oglesby spent considerable time after White's press show cross-checking his story against what is widely known about the events of 11/22/63.

"When I first heard White's charges, I thought, great, at long last a ghost had risen from the grave," says Oglesby. "His scenario certainly fits with the body of facts as we know them. But by the second day, I'd decided that this was almost certainly a hoax."

Oglesby now says that two aspects of White's story particularly trouble him. One is the implication that the CIA's involvement reached all the way to the top — far beyond, as numerous investigators have contended, a "rogue element" that operated "off the books," in Oglesby's words, from the main chain of command. The other is Ricky White himself, who presents himself (suspiciously, in Oglesby's view) as a simple Texas good ol' boy. His support-

ers have even hinted that White is "too dumb" to have made the whole thing up.

And White does have his supporters, including founders of the JFK Assassination Information Center in Dallas, which took 300 to 400 calls itself after hosting the "bombshell" news conference. Backing White in his effort to peddle the Roscoe-Oswald-JFK story, moreover, is a group of seven Midland, Texas, businessmen who have fronted him \$100,000, hoping for a fat return on their investment. And that bothers Oglesby, too.

"The real alarm bell is this business relationship," he notes. "Once that formed, there was a price tag on every piece of the developmental action, from a book deal [rejected by Viking two years ago] to an HBO movie."

"I also doubt [White] is as dumb as he'd like people to believe he is," adds Oglesby. "And if he's not behind the hoax, one of those Midland people could be well-versed in assassination literature, know of the White-Oswald connection in the Marines [the two servicemen reportedly shipped out overseas together] and saw the possibility of weaving a story some dumb Yankee would pay big bucks for."

Fellow AIB member Bob Katz, another local author (his first novel, "Hot Air," was just published by Birch Lane Press), heard about Ricky White's story a day before it became public — a direct function, Katz says, of the old-buff network he barely feels plugged into anymore.

"I'd still love to see some positive, verifiable developments in the case," Katz states. "What isn't needed are murky, unverifiable hypotheses. In a way, this reminds me of the old Clifford Irving-Howard Hughes hoax, where someone knows enough about an actual case to throw on an overlay of so-called facts."

John Stockwell, who spent 13 years in the CIA, disagrees with the doubters. The author of several books on the intelligence community, including the best-selling "In Search of Enemies," Stockwell has interviewed White personally and spent two months analyzing his "evidence." He says White, who he claims passed two lie-detector tests, is either the genuine article or a hapless patsy. But not a cunning fraud.

"Ricky's story pretty much tracks from A to Z," Stockwell asserts. "And his 'dumb act' is no act. If this is a hoax, then someone really knowledgeable — and with access to

family photos — has to be behind it."

The photos Stockwell refers to include one of White's mother in the employ of Dallas nightclub owner Jack Ruby, who later murdered Oswald on live television, and others of Oswald himself, taken by the Whites. Roscoe White is reported to have joined the Dallas police force just two months before the Kennedy shooting and also to have once lived across the street from Officer Tippit. Roscoe White died in 1971, in a welding-shop accident that Stockwell suspects was part of a CIA "clean-up" effort.

"I admit the press conference left me dissatisfied," concedes Stockwell, who hopes Texas attorney general Jim Mattox will open his own investigation into the matter. "I feel like [White and the others] only put out around one-third of what they know. They could do better. And will before it's over."

Perhaps, counters Robert Gardiner. And perhaps not.

Gardiner worked as a researcher on two books, "Best Evidence" and "Conspiracy," that laid out plausible who-killed-JFK scenarios. Involved in the probe since 1970, he also served as director of the Assassination Archives and is a close ally of Paul Hoch, a major player in the field. He answered Hoch's phone in Berkeley — which has also been ringing off the hook.

"So far, this amounts to a pile of accusations without evidence," Gardiner asserted. "It comes from the same Texas crowd that held a press conference six to eight weeks ago, promising to 'name' Kennedy's assassins. Which they did not. We refer to that one as 'the shot heard 'round the immediate vicinity.'"

Allowing that he has not seen what little "evidence" White has offered, Gardiner says the bottom line is that Congress found evidence of a conspiracy, the US Justice Department chose not to investigate further, the Senate Judiciary Committee now has jurisdiction over the case and that is that.

"The good news," quips Gardiner, "is I've spent 15 years of my life studying this, and I still have no idea who shot President Kennedy. The bad news is, I keep seeing people like Ricky White surface."

The old news? That people like Ricky White have to face not only jaded federal investigators, and a quizzical press corps, but a cadre of well-informed assassination buffs as well. In the end, they may prove to be the toughest audience of all to win over.

Not so