

The Grassy Knoll Papers

The inside story of how some Boston activists prodded Congress to admit that Oswald did not act alone

By David Williams and Harvey Z. Yazijian



“JFK AND KING VICTIMS OF CONSPIRACIES—HOUSE PANEL. JUSTICE DEPARTMENT TO GET REPORT.” These headlines on the front page of the *Boston Globe* last December 31 may have startled most of the paper's readers that morning. It was not that the Boston public had bought the government's official version of the John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations without question—they had not. They were, however, skeptical that the government and the national news media would after fifteen years abandon that granddaddy of cover-ups: the lone-assassin theory to explain the murders of Kennedy and King.

What caused the abrupt about-face of official policy? Though it is true that the political climate has certainly changed in the past few years, Congress did not undertake the most recent assassination probe of its own volition. Nor was this probe simply more sophisticated or determined than those that preceded it.

No, the December 31, 1978, headlines came about in large part because the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) was spurred to action by a large and vocal segment of the American public, and by a Boston-bred grassroots organization that attempted to serve as the public's voice—the Assassination Information Bureau.

The AIB story actually begins on a chilly winter night early in 1973, when a surprisingly large crowd—responding to a few leaflets and a small listing in a local underground weekly—filed into the Charles Street Meeting House to attend an audiovisual presentation entitled “Who Killed JFK?” It was delivered by a young Cambridge freelance journalist and assassination student named Bob Katz. Using slides taken at the scene of the Kennedy assassination, photographs of key evidence, and a very grainy copy of the now famous Zapruder film, Katz made everyone present an eyewitness to the monstrous crime. Katz then laid out his case against the Warren Com-

mission's lone-assassin conclusion, stressing ignored eyewitness testimony, suppressed evidence, and ominous organized crime/anti-Castro Cuban connections that tended to contradict the commission's findings.

Coincidentally, the Katz lecture occurred at a time when the arrest of several intelligence types and anti-Castro Cubans in the Democratic National Committee headquarters was beginning to develop into a national scandal. Conspiracy theories were about to come out of the closet in a big way.

By the spring of 1973, Katz had acquired a small following of conspiracy buffs, among them Carl Oglesby, founder and past president of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and then a political columnist for the *Boston Phoenix*. At the time Oglesby was developing an analysis of recent American political history, in which he contended that Watergate was merely another major battle in a continuing struggle between rival political elites, which Oglesby labeled “Yankees” and “Cowboys.” Oglesby further argued that the assassination of Yankee John F. Kennedy by Cowboys unknown was one of the first acts in this clandestine war. If nothing else, Oglesby's controversial thesis was one of the first to place the political assassinations of the sixties in a plausible historical context.

We the authors—Williams a film student, Yazijian an aspiring writer—joined our friend Bob Katz in a small discussion group at Oglesby's Cambridge apartment: we called the group the Grassy Knoll Debating Society, and we explored the many erratic though often brilliant critiques of the Warren Commission Report. Caught up by the spell of the assassination inquiry, we arrived at the same conclusions: Oswald had been framed; the President's killers had not been apprehended; and the government was concealing many pertinent facts. Moreover, we came deeply to believe that the assas-

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sination question was no mere Agatha Christie whodunit or the endless scholarship of eccentrics—it was a matter of crucial historic importance that had to be placed on the national agenda. To that end, the informal Grassy Knoll Debating Society evolved into the more organized Assassination Information Bureau (AIB).

The budding awareness of those of us behind the AIB coincided with that of an enterprising young talent agent named Kathy Kinsella, of Boston's Lordly & Dame booking agency. Kinsella discovered the AIB at one of Katz's series of assassination lectures, and immediately recognized the strong public interest in the subject and the consequent potential of a lecture tour by AIB members. She was particularly impressed by the fact that the AIB's large audiences were the result of minimal advertising.

Once we had put together our basic lecture format, news of the AIB's presentation spread like wildfire. A typical AIB audiovisual presentation consisted of ninety-five slides related to the assassination and its aftermath, a boot-leg copy of the Zapruder film, an accompanying narrative, and a question-and-answer session with the audience, which inevitably lasted until the janitors kicked everyone out of the building.

By the fall of 1973, we had assembled two teams of lecturers to meet the heavy demand, and over the next three years various AIB members spoke before a total of six hundred audiences in forty-five states.

The experience was heady and rewarding. Standing-room-only crowds were common (we often outdrew the school basketball team), and return engagements were frequent (Kansas State University, for example, had us a total of five times). The lectures were a perfect vehicle for delivering our message: Contact was personal, and people were able to view our "evidence" with their own eyes.

Furthermore, Watergate created an ideal political climate for presenting a critique of the Warren Report. It bared a Byzantine world of dirty tricks and conspiracies in which the ends were always thought to justify the means. The spectacle of Watergate enhanced the AIB's credibility and that of its presentation.

The AIB's early Cambridge office, in a back room on the second floor of an apartment building at 63 Inman Street, was a study in political funk. It sheltered a curious collective of easygoing folk whose conversation was rich and eclectic, ranging from Luis Tiant's E.R.A. to the latest mysterious death of an assassination witness.

Colorful jargon was spoken there. Terms such as "magic bullet," "grassy knoll," "umbrella man," and "neuro-

muscular reaction" had meaning for only a few in those halcyon days. In the spring, a sweet aroma testifying to the AIB's "grassroots" wafted about the file cabinets, and the bureau and its friends took to the softball fields. Fortunately, the AIB fared better in politics than it did in softball—first in war, first in peace, and a dismal last in Cambridge Class C.

There was not a three-piece suit among us—a distinction which set the AIB apart from such slick professionals as Mark Lane, nor were we prone to the excessive paranoia that characterized some of the lone-wolf researchers. We were the new blood, the second generation of critics who gave new energy to an old cause.

Consequently, the AIB was able to attract a broad constituency which transcended any traditional cultural, political, and economic barriers. We appealed to liberals and conservatives, blacks and whites, the rich and the poor. We offered no ideologies, no alternative lifestyles—just a perspective that people were finding increasingly credible.

Little did we realize when we set up the office, however, that scattered throughout the land were legions of buffs and others who had been waiting for fifteen years to try out their homespun conspiracy theories on the experts. The AIB became fair game for anyone with a dime and a kitchen-sink notion of who slew Jack Kennedy. Out of the woodwork they came: amateur sleuths, housewife researchers, wide-eyed students, and, it must be said, nuts of every stripe and persuasion—so much so that the office often doubled as a psychosocial clinic for advanced paranoiacs. The Betelgeuse connection illustrates:

AIB: Hello.

Caller: I'm calling long distance from a phone booth and I don't have much time. I think they're out to get me.

AIB: Uh, just back up a little and—like, say, who are you?

Caller: I can't say, but I'm talking about Jack Kennedy. I'm talking about his killers. They're aliens.

AIB: Well, we've already covered the foreign aspects of the assassination and...

Caller: I don't mean from Russia or Cuba, I mean from Betelgeuse.

AIB: Beetle Juice?

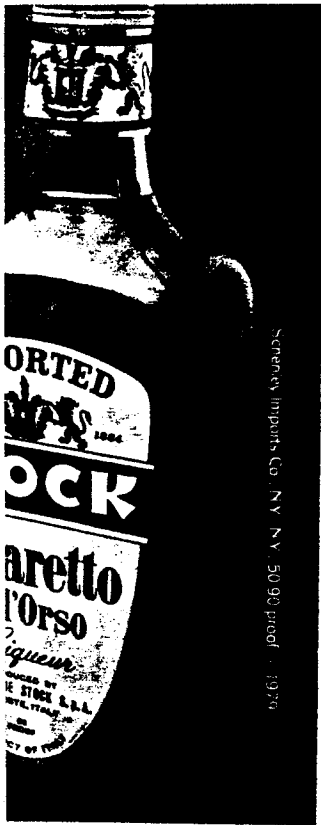
Caller: No, *Betelgeuse*. It's a star system light years from here. Traversable via hyperspace. And these people have the fourth-dimensional ram jets in addition to having infiltrated the CIA, the FBI, and the KGB.

AIB: Say what?

Caller: I can't talk much longer, but I'll tell you this: Look into that so-called meteor shower of last June 10. And check out this angle: How come no one actually saw this so-called comet of the century, Kohoutek?

AIB (pause): Uh, I dunno.

Caller: Look, I've got to go now. I



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may have said too much. They've already put my house under surveillance. So long and remember—keep watching the skies.

In the fall of 1974, the AIB set out in a major new direction when it sponsored the three-day Politics of Conspiracy conference at Boston University.

Previously, the Warren Commission critics had suffered from an inability to organize into a unified front. They jealously hoarded their research and were wracked with internecine fighting. Consequently, their arguments were not presented as forcefully or authoritatively as they could have been. The AIB proposed to change that by bringing together under one roof at B.U. as many writers, researchers, and activists as we could.

Among the activities offered were workshops and lectures on the subjects of Watergate, intelligence agencies, organized crime, and the major political murders of the 1960s. And on the final day of the conference, we discussed future strategies and ways to take the assassination question into the streets. The conference reflected a new political consciousness: Our cause had finally come out of the file cabinets and into full public view.

The conference was a success in many ways. Major portions of the talks were broadcast live over WBUR-FM, and the event received coverage in the *New York Times* and other national media. AIB affiliates were organized, and plans were made to produce similar conferences throughout the country. Alliances were forged within the critical community, such as that with Jeff Cohen, a Los Angeles-based writer, who would become the AIB's West Coast representative. Following the conference, the AIB began publishing a newsletter, *Clandestine America*, to cross-pollinate assassination research and keep its constituency abreast of the latest developments.

The AIB's first contact with official Washington came in 1975 when we filed for nonprofit status with the Internal Revenue Service. The AIB's cash flow was touch-and-go at the time. Lecture engagements were not plentiful because virtually everyone had seen *someone's* presentation. Our only alternative was to hit the fund-raising circuit. However, this route usually required tax exemption (so our supporters could deduct their contributions on their tax returns), a formal government designation which is generally reserved for more upright and orthodox groups. The IRS had never seen the likes of the AIB.

Sure enough, our request triggered alarms at the Boston IRS office, and was quickly forwarded to headquarters in Washington. We knew that the IRS would treat gingerly any organization with the word "assassination" in its name (as who wouldn't?), so we expected a

good grilling. And we got it. For twenty months, the AIB bared every comma and decimal point of its operation, and felt that our bona fides had clearly been established. But apparently no one at the IRS was willing to assume the responsibility for further legitimating the assassination question, and our request continued to be scrutinized.

By the summer of 1975, the AIB was in desperate financial straits, and we simply could not wait any longer for an IRS decision. The AIB's attorney, R. Arlen Johnson of Wellesley, requested and received a meeting with IRS officials in Washington; Johnson laid out the AIB's case for tax exemption, and his effort was instrumental in having the IRS finally rule in our favor. The AIB thus became the first and only nonprofit corporation in America which specialized in investigating contemporary political murder.

In April, 1975, a *Boston Globe* copy editor called our office with an offer to set up a meeting between AIB members and the paper's top editors. We accepted the offer, and a luncheon was arranged, at which three of our members delivered an abbreviated version of our lecture presentation. Most interested of the *Globe* people was associate editor Robert Healy, who proceeded to write an intelligent op-ed column entitled "Why the Dallas Files Should Be Re-opened." Unfortunately, the reporter whom the *Globe* assigned to follow up Healy with articles on the assassination beat was Jack Thomas (now an "At Large" columnist). Thomas punted. Although we offered him our assistance and full resources, Thomas's reportage indicated that he had done very little reading and even less investigating. So much for the *Globe's* contribution.

By the fall of 1975, the rising wave of Warren Commission criticism was cresting, and the call for a new investigation was irresistible. In response to the AIB's efforts and to a demand by the House Black Caucus for a new King assassination probe, Congress created the House Select Committee on Assassinations. The issue was now in the hands of Washington's top political honchos, and the job of enlightening members of Congress required more patience and finesse than the AIB had been accustomed to practicing. Accordingly, the AIB took the logical next step and relocated its office to Washington, moving into a building owned by seer-realtor Jeane Dixon. The building was a haven for several anti-establishment political groups, so the AIB members figured they saved the government money by moving into a building that was already bugged.

Washington is a formal and ordered city, uptight like no other city in America. It's a place where subtlety is prized, discretion assured, and caution is instinctive. There's simply too much political power lining its boulevards for other approaches

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to succeed.

For our part, the days of whistle-stop tours and activist audiences were over. College students gave way to congressional aides. Research briefs became more useful than bumper stickers. The AIB grew and changed as the assassination issue took on increasingly greater importance.

The AIB was determined to make the HSCA the first government-sanctioned assassination probe to be monitored and assisted by the private community of assassination scholars. However, we found committee members to be in a confused state when we arrived in Washington. Representative Thomas Downing, a courtly Virginia Republican, had decided to retire from Congress in 1976, and was replaced in January, 1977, by Henry Gonzalez, a Texas Democrat and assassin-gadfly known more for his enthusiasm than for his political acumen.

Consequently, the probe was directionless and many staffers were woefully uninformed. One critic recounts how a House committee aide interrupted a discussion of Oswald and the Dallas Police Department to ask, "Who was J. D. Tippit?" "My God," the critic thought, "they don't even know who was shot that day!"

Fortunately, not all were so ignorant, and soon we were working Capitol Hill, introducing ourselves to staffers and preparing background papers on prospective

witnesses for the committee. Leading the AIB's research effort was Jim Kostman, a former MIT philosophy professor, who oversaw the writing and distribution of several key research briefs. One instrumental brief dealt with Loran Hall, an anti-Castro soldier of fortune who turned out to be the owner of a rifle discovered in Dealey Plaza shortly after the Kennedy assassination. This revelation prompted the committee to schedule a rare public session to interrogate Hall, who thereupon took the Fifth Amendment to all questions put to him.

Another of Kostman's highly praised briefings examined organized-crime boss Santos Trafficante. Kostman had noted several connections between Trafficante and nightclub owner Jack Ruby, research that was instrumental in prompting the HSCA to look for—and find—more such ties. Soon Trafficante was being publicly questioned by the HSCA (and he too took the Fifth).

The committee, however, continued to have internal troubles. Chairman Gonzalez had locked horns with chief counsel Richard Sprague over the issue of which one was to be the ultimate authority in the probe. After a messy and highly publicized struggle, both men resigned from the committee. To the horror of the critics, HSCA had become the joke of the town and editorial cartoonists had a field day with its bumbling ways.

The committee's fortunes were soon re-

versed, however, with the arrival of two new—and different—leaders: Louis Stokes, the black Cleveland Democrat who finally gave the committee the firm and quiet leadership that it desperately needed; and G. Robert Blakey, a Cornell University professor and former counsel to the late Senator John McClellan's Judiciary Committee, who replaced Sprague as chief counsel and head of the HSCA staff. Blakey was very familiar with the ways of Capitol Hill, unlike his predecessor.

Under the leadership of Stokes and Blakey, the HSCA regained its composure and found new direction. They charted a cautious path for the committee, one that would not offend or provoke anyone; any more bad press, they knew, could destroy the committee. Thus, Blakey announced at his first press conference that it would be his last press conference until the end of the investigation, and he subsequently ordered committee members and their staff to proceed in strict secrecy.

This policy frustrated the AIB and others in the critical community. We had seen investigation after investigation quietly evolve, unchecked and unmonitored, into whitewashes. Nonetheless, the HSCA was the only show in town, and we continued to provide the committee with research and support, often with productive results.

For example, the AIB undertook the

awesome task of researching and analyzing the 100,000 documents relating to the Kennedy assassination that were declassified by the FBI in 1977 under the Freedom of Information Act. Slowly, those engaged in this Herculean effort were able to piece together a revealing look at the FBI's inner workings; eventually, ABI researcher Bob Ranftel turned up one document that became particularly important—a memo from the FBI's Dallas field office dated November 25, 1963. The memo, which alluded to the existence of a previously unreported "home movie" of the Kennedy assassination, was circulated throughout the assassination-research community, until it landed in the hands of Earl Golz, crack investigative reporter for the *Dallas Morning News*. Golz tracked down a copy of the film from the man who had taken it that day in Dallas—Charles Bronson of Ada, Oklahoma—and passed the film on to one of the HSCA's photographic experts.

The film, taken minutes before the assassination, clearly shows the window on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, from which Oswald allegedly fired—but according to the HSCA expert, the movement of two figures can be discerned in the film. The AIB helped get this word out among committee members, who were finishing up their investigation; the committee then reconvened its panel of optics experts to view the film, and many of them, too, saw two fig-

ures in the alleged gun perch.

The HSCA was unable to follow up on this remarkable new material because of the lateness of the hour, but it did recommend that the Justice Department further examine the film; after all, if it can be verified that there are two figures at the window, the film will be the most dramatic evidence yet that there was a conspiracy to murder John F. Kennedy.

The HSCA's final report will not reveal who killed Kennedy, although the committee has officially stated that the question is unanswered and that it does not believe that Oswald acted alone. However, the committee did provide valuable insights into the possible forces behind the assassination, and researchers are chomping at the bit to examine the forty-odd volumes of committee depositions, hearings, and evidence that will eventually be published.

Meanwhile, the AIB is pushing the White House to appoint a special prosecutor to pursue the assassination question rather than have the Justice Department take over the probe. Says AIB member Carl Oglesby from Washington: "There's got to be a special prosecutor because the Justice Department route would involve the FBI, and that's exactly what we don't want. The FBI's track record is just too uniformly dismal—they've destroyed evidence, misled the Warren Commission, and dropped leads."

Though the issue has advanced to a politically sensitive stage, the AIB still sees the need for public political action. As Oglesby says, "We're trying to keep in touch with the events as they unfold in order to keep our constituency apprised of the situation. The real energy that has been responsible for developing the evidence in this case has come from the critical community—as will the energy for any future thorough and honest probe."

If anything, the AIB's work is just beginning. Not only could the government's JFK and MLK probes continue for several years, any conspiracy verdicts could carry a strong implication that other political events—such as the Robert Kennedy assassination—should be re-examined. Questions must be addressed—among them that of why a myriad of previous assassination probes by the government have consistently failed. And that of why the national news media were somehow unable to evaluate the abundance of assassination evidence.

Above all, the assassination investigation has underscored the need for citizen watchdogs, and the AIB expects to be around for some time to come. It will continue to monitor the current probes and to lobby for new ones; it will continue its research and keep the public informed of what it finds. The AIB is, after all, a legacy from the days when we thought political power really did belong to the people.