

of the full report will find no basis for questioning the commission's conclusions that President Kennedy was killed by Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone."

Within two years, however, opinion about the report had changed. In the fall of 1966, both the Gallup and Harris public opinion polls disclosed that nearly two-thirds of the American people doubted the commission's conclusion that Oswald was the sole assassin. This public skepticism has continued ever since: The *Washington Post* reported in November 1983 that four out of five Americans did not believe the Warren Commission's version of Kennedy's assassination.

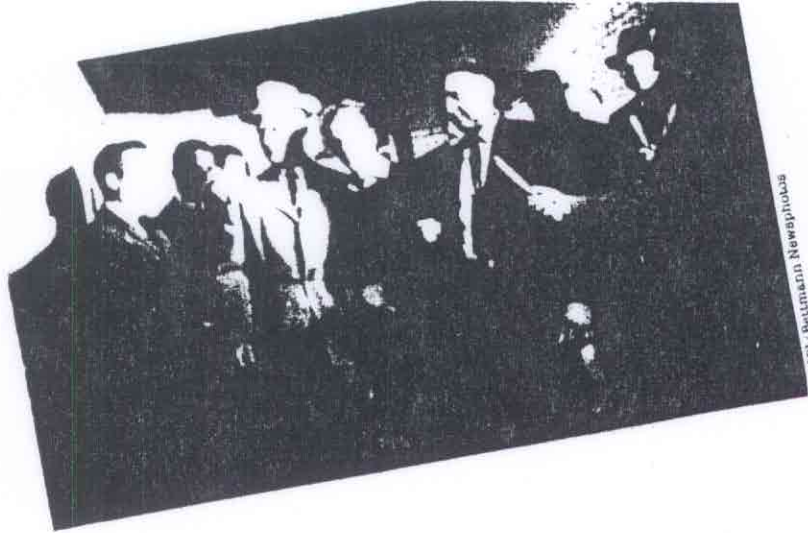
This doubt can be attributed in part to the widely-held belief that the assassination was too monstrous a crime to have been committed by one person named Oswald. "For many people," wrote Salinger, "it is simply not within the realm of belief that this man of grace and ability could be taken from the world by a mindless psychopath."

The doubts can be attributed in part to what Americans learned about their government in the 1960s and '70s, when the Vietnam War and Watergate made many doubt the veracity and motives of high government officials. "Implicit in this skepticism," wrote Henry Hurt in his 1985 study of the assassination, *Reasonable Doubt*, "is a feeling that the public has been deceived by those vested with the special trust to conduct national affairs out of the sight and reach of the ordinary citizenry."

But doubts about the Warren Report can be attributed in larger measure to an outpouring of books and essays, beginning even before the commission had submitted its report and continuing ever since, that challenged and criticized virtually everything in the report and put forth different versions of the assassination. "A whole army of sleuths," according to one observer, "had taken upon itself, some out of honest misgivings, others for fun and profit, the task of demolishing the Commission and its conclusions."

Few Americans, including many of the critics themselves, have actually read and digested the 888-page Warren Commission Report or its 26 supplementary volumes of supporting evidence. Thus the report's critics have had a relatively easy time creating doubts and suspicion.

If one does read and study all of the volumes put out by the commission, one will find that most of the questions about the assassination that were answerable were answered. Where no absolute answers were possible, the commission avoided categorical statements. Instead, for example, it said about the number of shots fired, "the weight of the evidence indicates that there were three shots fired," that the evidence was "very persuasive," that the same bullet that pierced Kennedy's throat also wounded Connally, and that it could find "no evi-



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dence" that Oswald was part of any conspiracy.

This is not to say the Warren Commission is above criticism. But as one observer has noted, "If the critics are judged against the same impossibly high standards of evidence that they apply to the Warren Commission, the critics' own efforts become as elusive as a fistful of water." While the critics have maligned the Warren Commission, they've used its report as the main source for their own books attacking it. Yet they've provided little in the way of a credible alternative to the commission's conclusions.

In rejecting the commission findings, critics put forth numerous theories about the assassination. A sampling provides some idea of their range and, in many cases, their improbability: A Texas oil millionaire ordered the deaths of Kennedy and Khrushchev to gain control of the world oil market; Kennedy was killed by Southern racists; Oswald was a fall guy for reactionary interests, including, variously, FBI, CIA and Army types; an unknown assassin fired at Kennedy from a manhole (since filled in) on the grassy knoll and escaped through a storm sewer; an assassin fired from a papier-mache tree built especially for the occasion and later removed; the Warren Commission deliberately suppressed and distorted evidence to fit a preconceived verdict that Oswald acted alone.

One critic, Harold Weisberg in *White-wash* (1966), seemed unwilling to believe anything in the report except the page numbers. With such a wave of anti-Warren Commission publications appearing so soon after the report was written, it's not difficult to understand why many Americans, with little knowledge of the commission document, began to doubt its conclusions.

There's been no let-up in the criticism of the commission or in the publication of new assassination theories. If you disbelieve that Oswald is the sole assassin, then you can choose assassins and conspirators from the Russians, the Castro people, dissident elements of the FBI and CIA (with Oswald as agent for all of them), the Teamsters with Mafia pals, Texas right-wingers acting for God and country, the anti-Castro people incensed over the failure of the Bay of Pigs venture, the Minutemen, the Klan, the Dal-

las police force, New Orleans homosexuals connected with organized crime or the CIA, a professional assassin who was a contract killer for the CIA, or a Russian KGB agent posing as Oswald.

Henry Hurt's study, *Reasonable Doubt*, and a 1982 scholarly account by Michael L. Kurtz, *Crime of the Century*, have added to the residue of uncertainty in people's minds by the conclusions they reached. According to Kurtz, "The evidence clearly . . . demonstrates that John Kennedy was killed as a result of a conspiracy and that, intentionally or unintentionally, the federal government assisted in concealing proof of that conspiracy." Hurt contends, "A powerful case can be made that Oswald did not kill Kennedy. The answer as to who did is as beclouded as ever."

Many thought or hoped that the Zapruder film record of the assassination would put an end to a number of controversies about it. But Kennedy was behind a road sign, out of Zapruder's sight, when he was first hit, so the exact location and time of the first shot was not recorded in Zapruder's frames 206-225. (The film passed through the camera at 18.3 frames a second, providing both a visual record and a clock of the assassination.) No one, including the Warren Commission or the independent investigators, has been able to determine precisely what happened at the outset. In frame 206 the president vanishes behind the sign; when he emerges in frame 225, about a second later, his face is distorted, and his right hand is rising toward his neck. By frame 230, just .27 of a second after coming into view, Kennedy's shoulders are hunched and both hands are at his throat, a position he remains in until the end of the sequence in frame 244.

It's not possible here to deal with the assassination controversies in detail. But two of the endlessly disputed matters can be examined to some extent: Whether a gunman could've fired three shots within the time listed by the Warren Commission, "from approximately 4.8 to in excess of 7 seconds," and whether a gunman from the sixth floor of the Book Depository could have hit his slow-moving target.

Critics generally say no to the first matter to support their theory of a second gunman.