

JESSE HILL FORD

Guest columnist

We yearned to answer his call

BEVERLY HILLS, Calif. — It is a quarter-century since the death of Lancer. Now, more than ever, John F. Kennedy's Secret Service code name seems appropriate.

His all-too-brief, albeit incandescent presidency had such a magical quality that the memory of it each year at this season of dying makes us long to find somewhere in the flames of autumn the promise that our country will somehow rise again in unity to scale the heights of excellence his leadership inspired.

In all human experience, from earliest antiquity to the present hour, perhaps nothing except what the world knew during the Crusades can compare. For example, during his cruelly interrupted tenure in the White House, Vietnam was a symbol not of defeat, but of freedom imperiled. Capt. Tom McEwen, USAF, a boyhood friend of mine, volunteered for

the air commandos and was shot down and killed during his second tour of duty in Vietnam. His sacrifice and the pain we knew at his loss seemed justified in the name of freedom.

The response to the challenge of the Peace Corps, like the response to our efforts on behalf of South Vietnam, was a rousing hurrah. The USA in that long-ago, magic season yearned to be called to service and sacrifice of the most unselfish kind. Lancer sent out that call, and thousands responded, asking not what this country could do for them but what they could do for this country and for mankind.

When Lancer decreed men upon the moon, just as in Alan Lerner's *Camelot* that inexpressibly fantastic miracle was as good as done, and we achieved world ascendancy in space.

Although it is 25 years today since he was taken from us, his

Jesse Hill Ford is a novelist and screenwriter.

memory remains indelibly alive. No matter that the wilderness of the future was trackless and uncharted, his appeal found his country ready to follow him, though the way be laced with the lairs of one dragon after another. Under Lancer, belief was operative, and therefore nothing else mattered.

It is feckless to speculate on the long catalog of errors that might have been avoided had he lived to the fullness of his years. The Romans observed that the best death is that which is unexpected, cold comfort to be sure. But now, as we face yet another winter without him, may we all find courage to hope that the spring tides of those worthy ambitions with which he imbued the USA may someday rise again and prevail.

QUOTELINES

"It was a very complicated plot, brilliantly executed. Could any intelligent person believe that kind of thing was organized by one man?"

— *Marina Oswald Porter, widow of Lee Harvey Oswald*

"It was clear beyond a reasonable doubt that Oswald was the lone gunman who killed President Kennedy."

— *David Belin, legal counsel to Warren Commission*

"The image of America seems to have grown older since his death."

— *Arthur Schlesinger, historian, JFK speech writer*

"Everybody wants another Kennedy. That's sort of dumb. There is not going to be another Abraham Lincoln or another Kennedy."

— *Marc Siwak, high school student, Southfield, Mich.*

Plenty of theories to go around

Since John Kennedy's death, many books have been printed expounding various conspiracy theories. Here are a few:

- ▶ *"They've Killed The President!": The Search for the Murderers of John F. Kennedy*, by Robert S. Anson. Asserts that the CIA and FBI covered up evidence.
- ▶ *Mr. President, You Have The Right To Remain Silent ...* by Mike Ashman. Implicates Lyndon Johnson and J. Edgar Hoover in the assassination.
- ▶ *Communism Killed Kennedy, But Did America Learn?* by James D. Bales.
- ▶ *The Plot to Kill The President*, by George R. Blakey. Alleges that organized crime was behind a plot to kill Kennedy.
- ▶ *Coup D'etat in America: The CIA and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy*, by Michael Canfield. Alleges that JFK was murdered by the CIA.
- ▶ *Coincidence or Conspiracy*, by The Committee to Investigate Assassinations. Points to a series of "coincidences" connected with the assassination.
- ▶ *The Umbrella Man: Evidence of Conspiracy*, by Robert B. Cutler. Alleges that an accomplice to the assassination carried a black umbrella.
- ▶ *The Oswald File*, by Michael Eddowes. Claims that Kennedy's death was a Soviet conspiracy.
- ▶ *A Heritage of Stone*, by Jim Garrison. Sees the assassination as a military takeover of the U.S.
- ▶ *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?* by Joachim Joesten. Asserts that Oswald was a scapegoat used by a conspiratorial group.
- ▶ *Kennedy and Lincoln*, by John K. Latimer. A doctor makes medical and ballistic comparisons of the two assassinations.
- ▶ *Best Evidence: Disguise and Deception in the Assassination of John F. Kennedy*, by David S. Lifton. Claims that the president's body was altered before the official autopsy was performed.
- ▶ *Appointment in Dallas: The Final Solution to the Assassination of JFK*, by Hugh C. McDonald. The author, a veteran law enforcement officer, traces and interviews the "real assassin."
- ▶ *Betrayal*, by Robert D. Morrow. Asserts that Cuban exiles plotted with the CIA in the assassination.
- ▶ *The Great Expectations of John Connally*, by James Reston Jr., to be published in 1989. States that Oswald may have been aiming at Connally, then governor of Texas.

VOICES FROM ACROSS THE USA / Where were you when you heard



BESSIE RIVERS GRAYSON
63, college professor
Huntsville, Ala.

I was an associate librarian at a college in Little Rock, Ark., and was in my office when the news came over the radio that President Kennedy had been shot. There were other people in the library, and we began to express sorrow that it happened. Momentarily, the news came that he died. That's when we started crying.



JAMES DAVIS, 54
Corporate vice president
Bettendorf, Iowa

At an employee union meeting when someone came in the room and announced that President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. We had been discussing mundane matters such as contract violations, and the news made those matters seem so small. I watched the entire rehash all evening on television.



SUSAN HELM, 44
Real estate broker
Harrisburg, Pa.

At the time, I worked for Blue Cross. Someone called in and told us the news. Everyone was totally stunned. We didn't go home, but I don't think we got any work done the rest of the day. I was brought up in a way that I did not cry over things, so I didn't. But I felt bad. It was definitely a horrible thing to happen.



SAL ALBANESE, 39
City Council member
Brooklyn, N.Y.

In my freshman year in high school. I was going from my physical education class to last-period geography class. I heard students in the hall saying the president had been killed. When I got to class, the teacher, Mrs. Stern, confirmed the news. I was very depressed. There was a pall all over the school.

that President Kennedy had been assassinated?



MATTIE BRANNAN, 59
*Retired secretary
Show Low, Ariz.*

I was home packing to move to Arizona from New Mexico. The TV was disconnected, and a neighbor yelled the news. I went to her house to watch it. I didn't believe it, even though I was seeing it on TV. For those of us who were strong Democrats, it was like the goals we had set were postponed, if not changed, at that point.



VERNON SYKES, 37
*Economist
Akron, Ohio*

In junior high school. The news came over the P.A. system. It disrupted everything. The teacher left the room to get more information. When he returned, he told us to pray for the president. I was very upset; everything was one big question mark. I wanted to know why someone would want to kill the president.



FRANCES MERRILL, 49
*Homemaker
Salt Lake City, Utah*

We were living in Vista, Calif. My husband was a career military man in the Marine Corps. I was home with an infant when the news came on television. It was a horrifying experience. We lived near a military base, and everyone was placed on alert. I couldn't believe something like that could happen in my lifetime.

PATRICIA NELSON LIMERICK

Guest columnist

So many puzzles have missing pieces

DESERT HOT SPRINGS, Calif. — I am back visiting in the area where I grew up, remembering the Mysteries of Foothill Boulevard, a long, city-after-city route leading into Los Angeles.

Twenty years ago, I used to patrol that road from a Greyhound bus, and every now and then, a sudden event — a collision, or the gathering of a crowd — on the other side of the street would grab at my attention.

As the bus moved on, carrying us away from the unexplained mystery we'd just glimpsed, I would follow a well-established path of thought:

"There's one more thing," I would think, "that I'm never going to understand. How did those cars come to collide? Where were the drivers going? What moods were they in? How come they didn't see each other coming?"

I never once penetrated any of the Mysteries of Foothill Boulevard, but I remember that feeling of annoyance — that the universe came with so many puzzles with insufficient pieces. If I could just get off the bus and go back there, I used to think, then I'm sure I could figure it out.

Now, I suspect that even if I'd been on the site the instant after the crash, even if I'd been on the "grassy knoll" in Dallas an instant after the Kennedy

Patricia Nelson Limerick is a historian at the University of Colorado.

shooting, I would still have been too late for the full story. The past slides out of our reach as relentlessly and rapidly as the events on the other side of Foothill Boulevard used to slip beyond my grasp.

But we meet the mysteries of the past with an equally relentless urge to know; we continue to ask, "Why?" with the persistence of 2-year-olds.

And when we can't pin down the answers, we make leaps from suspicion to certainty.

In our minds, a mystery is either solved or unsolved; it cannot be semi-solved. Confronted with the semi-solution of the Kennedy assassination, a large number of Americans find an emotionally more satisfying solution in conspiracy.

A conspiracy theory has, after all, a wonderfully circular way of proving itself.

If the available evidence does not record the conspiracy, then that is because the conspirators succeeded in altering or destroying the record. The less proof we have of its existence, the more proof we have that the conspiracy worked.

Trying to figure out the past, we travel through a maze of uncertainty.

In that maze, all roads lead back to Foothill Boulevard.

GEORGE THOMPSON

An opposing view

Conspiracy theories are well grounded

MELBOURNE VILLAGE, Fla. — Questions? Of course, there are questions: Was there a conspiracy? Was there a cover-up?

The answer is "yes" to both. They sit in the shadows of my mind — unanswered and unsettling in the doubts they raise about what really happened that fateful day in Dallas.

Visceral reaction? Perhaps. But it is no surprise that a recent poll shows that two-thirds of the nation shares my restless ruminations.

Twenty-plus years in the Foreign Service have inured me to the reality of words like conspiracy and cover-up. Unfortunately, they will not be found in the 2½-pound, 366-page Warren Commission report. Its purpose was to close the case, so it dealt with neither question — leaving the nation to wonder and to doubt.

► Was there a conspiracy? Probably. The questions simply will not go away:

Was there a gunman in front of the caravan? The 1979 House Select Committee on Assassinations reported that was a "high probability."

How else to explain: Police running toward the knoll; eyewitness accounts of a fleeing man; the president's head snapping back from a bullet fired from front when Lee Harvey Oswald's three rounds were from above and behind; author David Lifton's *Best Evidence* saying that — to hide the evidence — someone restructured the president's head wound prior to autopsy, citing FBI agents who saw evidence of surgery Dallas doctors say they did not do?

Was the killing a tit-for-tat Cuban reaction to CIA/Mafia attempts to kill Fidel Castro? Was Jack Ruby, the organized

George Thompson, a former U.S. Foreign Service officer and newspaper editor, is a weekly columnist for Florida Today.

crime-connected nightclub owner who shot Oswald, merely an impassioned patriot enraged by visions of a shattered Camelot? Didn't Oswald also meet with Mafia members?

► Was there a "cover-up?" Possibly. Many government employees could, if they would, tell how they took part or knew about cover-ups in everything from cost overruns to gone-awry operations that ended in massive losses of money and blood.

But USA TODAY readers don't need such stories to explain why they wonder about government and cover-up. All they need is a library, time and a list:

The battleship Maine.
Pearl Harbor.
Veteran deaths from the first atomic bomb; Agent Orange.
Gulf of Tonkin.
Cambodia bombing.
Air America, drugs.
CIA, DEA, White House, Noriega, drugs.
Watergate.
Irangate.
The 1980 election and the Tehran hostages release.
President Carter's briefing book, GOP.
Grenada invasion, U.S. military communications, U.S. deaths from friendly fire.
Challenger, causes, deaths, and more — a whole lifetime of unanswered questions.
But in the death of John Fitzgerald Kennedy 25 years ago today, no question is more hauntingly alive now than, "Why?"



SSW

Recover shattered visions, promises left unkept

By David Seavey, USA TODAY

DEBATE

THE JFK ASSASSINATION

Today's debate includes our opinion that the many conspiracy theories regarding the assassination of John F. Kennedy are far-fetched, an opposing view from Florida, other views from California, and voices from across the USA.

Conspiracy theories remain unfounded

In a span of seconds, with a clash of gunshot, the president was gone and the USA plunged into paralytic grief.

Now, 25 years later, on the anniversary of his assassination and with massive news media blankets of reminiscence, we remember John F. Kennedy: the stirring words of his inaugural address, his challenge to explore the face of the moon, his vision to create the Peace Corps, his confrontation with Southern leaders as the civil rights movement attacked racist regional laws.

We recall the failures of the Bay of Pigs and the Berlin Wall and the triumphs of the Cuban missile crisis and the nuclear test ban treaty. And as we revisit the pain and relive the loss, we ask the unanswerable question: "Why?"

In the absence of a logical answer, many of us conclude there was a conspiracy. The assassin had spent time in the Soviet Union — so the Russians did it. The CIA had plotted to kill Castro — so Castro did it. Or the CIA did it. Or the Mafia did it. Or the Ku Klux Klan did it.

Such conspiracy theories have produced books, articles, films and even a real-life criminal-court trial in which a New Orleans man, Clay Shaw, was falsely accused of a conspiracy. That trial, a sham, cleared Shaw.

In fact, a commission of distinguished citizens, headed by then-Chief Justice Earl Warren and made up of leaders of both parties in all branches of government, conducted an exhaustive investigation following Kennedy's death.

That commission concluded that the assassin was a lone gunman, not a conspirator. Those commissioners were not perfect, but they examined theories, rumors and much of the so-called "evidence" still being circulated this week.

Those commission members, concerned about their own integrity, never would have contrived to lie to the people of the USA, or cover up a conspiracy, or allow history to blacken their good names.

There simply was — and is — no substantive evidence to contradict the overwhelming proof that the assassin was a ticking time bomb, an act of violence waiting to happen. Shortly before he shot the president, he fired into the home of Gen. Edwin Walker in Dallas, the bullet narrowly missing Walker's head.

The fact is that Lee Harvey Oswald was a deeply disturbed, grotesquely flawed personality, driven as was John Hinckley, who tried to kill President Reagan, Arthur Bremer, who sought to kill former Alabama Gov. George Wallace, and Sirhan Sirhan, who slew Robert Kennedy.

And the fact is that there are other similarly disturbed personalities running loose in society today.

The sane and sensible thing to do is to seek to uncover and deal with those individuals, rather than to dig up old conspiracy "evidence" that "proves" nothing but a negative.

It is always remotely possible that someday, somehow, someone will find actual evidence that the Warren Commission missed.

But the time has come to bury these far-fetched and unsupported theories and to try, instead, to recover the visions that were shattered, the hopes that were destroyed, the promises left unkept that sad day a quarter-century ago.