

J.F.K. Death Still Invites Plot Theories

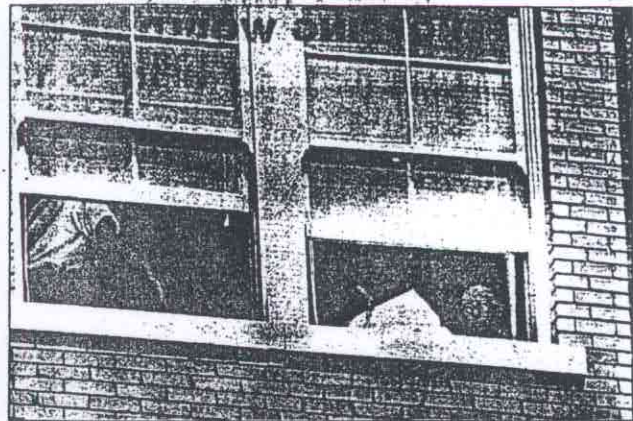
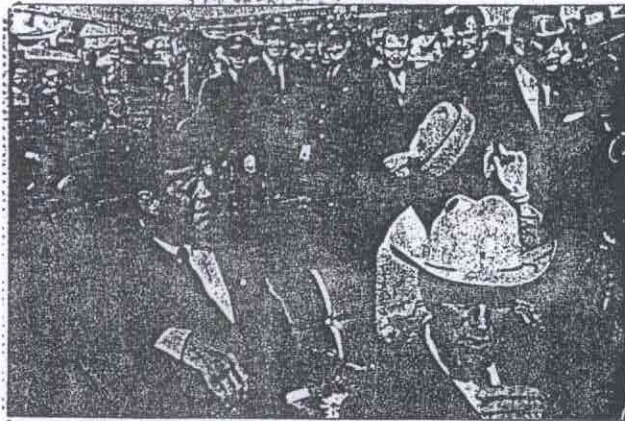
By SARA FRITZ
TIMES STAFF WRITER

WASHINGTON—Intrigued by Oliver Stone's controversial movie "JFK," Randolph H. Robertson went looking recently for physical evidence to support Stone's view that the assassination of President John F. Kennedy was the result of a conspiracy. He believes he found it.

A radiologist from Nashville, Robertson studied post-mortem X-rays of Kennedy's head and convinced himself that he found a second bullet wound in Kennedy's skull that had gone unnoticed before.

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President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy settle in limousine before motorcade departs from Dallas airport. Texas Gov. John Connally is in front seat. At right, Sen. Richard Russell in Texas School Book Depository window.

PLOT: New Theories Still Fuel Questions About Assassination of J.F.K.

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"The evidence has been sitting there for 30 years and nobody saw it. It is evidence he was killed as part of a conspiracy," Robertson said.

To most students of the assassination, Robertson's finding is highly implausible. But to Robertson, it is persuasive evidence that shots came from more than one direction, meaning that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone.

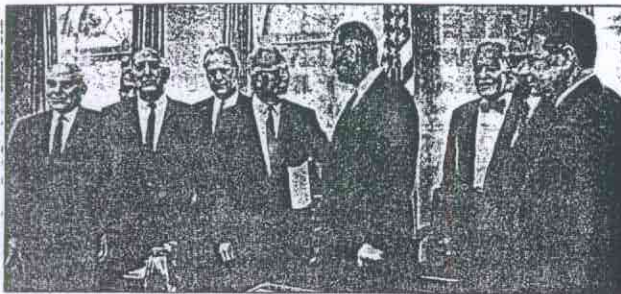
Thus another conspiracy theory was born—one of hundreds of unproven, speculative scenarios of international intrigue spun by historians, self-appointed investigators and conspiracy buffs since the fatal shots were fired in Dallas' Dealey Plaza on Nov. 22, 1963.

Paradoxically, the conspiracy theories stem in large measure from the shortcomings of the Warren Commission itself—the investigative panel that was supposed to put the matter to rest and that declared unequivocally in 1964 that it had found "no evidence" that Oswald was part of a conspiracy.

In the 30 years since the assassination, it has become clear that the Warren Commission's work was inadequate. While that does not necessarily mean the assassination was part of an international plot, so many crucial questions were left unanswered that conspiracy theorists rushed in to fill the void.

To be sure, many of the theorists—perhaps even most—have themselves been criticized for twisting the facts to prove their theories.

Nevertheless, in recent years, disclosure upon disclosure has revealed that the Warren Commission's probe was less than perfect—that the members were unenthusiastic about their task, that they failed to obtain crucial evidence from the CIA and FBI, that commissioners were too deferential to the privacy concerns of the Kennedy family and that even some commission staffers were dissatisfied with their final report.



Chief Justice Warren presents report to President Johnson. From left: John J. McCloy, Sen. Richard Russell, Rep. Gerald Ford, Warren, Johnson, Allen Dulles, Sen. John Sherman Cooper, Rep. Hale Boggs.

the Mafia, the CIA, Cuban leader Fidel Castro or Castro's opponents. One researcher has developed a list of 28 people who have been named at one time or another as Oswald's co-conspirators.

But the Warren Commission and its staff cannot be blamed for the most fundamental flaws in the findings. After all, they were hampered by the unwillingness of the CIA and the FBI to reveal to investigators certain key pieces of information.

Even now, those two agencies are being criticized for their slow response to a new law requiring disclosure of relevant government documents related to the assassination. More than a year after the law was passed, the CIA, citing national security and privacy concerns, continues to withhold at least 10,000 crucial pages of evidence and the FBI has yet to turn over even one of the 499,000 pages it has on the crime.

Not until years after the Warren Commission issued its report did the public learn that Kennedy was shot at a time when the CIA was

made public. But newly available information from CIA files has only fueled fresh disagreement about Oswald's motives.

In the CIA documents, Johnston thinks he has found more evidence of a Castro-inspired plot to assassinate Kennedy: a photograph taken in Mexico City of a Cuban-born American, Gilberto Policarpio Lopez, who is believed to have been in Dallas on Nov. 22 and to have fled to Cuba five days later. To Johnston, the evidence supports the theory that Castro had several designated hit men in the United States.

Likewise, John M. Newman, an Army major who teaches history at the University of Maryland and has reviewed all the CIA files, claims to have found evidence that the CIA was paying far closer attention to Oswald's activities before the assassination than was acknowledged at the time. He contends his findings contribute to the view that the CIA had something to hide.

And the PBS show "Frontline," which conducted an extensive probe in recreating a three-hour

vide—a departure from a standard investigative technique that often yields facts unobtainable in the presence of an official stenographer.

"I think they were awayed by a fear of what they'd find if they pressed too hard," Johnston said.

Of course, the Warren Commission was created largely with the purpose of halting—not promoting—speculation about Oswald's motives. By Warren's own account, when President Johnson asked him to head the probe, the President suggested darkly that without such an investigation, suspicion of Soviet or Cuban involvement in the assassination might lead to nuclear war.

Johnson also ordered Warren to finish the probe as quickly as possible, to avoid any entanglement with the upcoming 1964 presidential election.

Other than Warren, none of the commission members showed much commitment to the task of investigating the assassination.

According to Posner's account, Sen. Richard Russell heard only 5% of the testimony, and only three of the seven commissioners heard more than half of it.

Many critics have suggested—apparently wrongly—that the commission never questioned an initial FBI report stating that Os-

wald acted alone. According to a thorough review of the commission's work by U.S. News & World Report reporters Ted Gest and Joe Shapiro, the panel began its investigation with the notion that there was more than one gunman in Dealey Plaza—a theory that was not abandoned until investigators realized that one bullet went through Kennedy's body and struck then-Texas Gov. John B. Connolly seated beside him.

In later years, former commission lawyers acknowledged publicly that they were disappointed with the final report, which critics say is written more like a brief for the prosecution than an investigative report.

"The Warren Commission report was simpler than it should have been," said G. Robert Blakey, a Notre Dame Law School professor who served as chief counsel to the House Select Committee on Assassinations in the late 1970s.

In Blakey's view, because the debate over the Kennedy assassination has not been settled in 30 years, no amount of new evidence or even new witnesses, will ever finally satisfy every existing doubt.

"If somebody jumped up tomorrow and confessed, I don't think I'd believe him," he said. "I'd ask: 'Where have you been for 30 years? Are you writing a book?'"

At the request of the Kennedy family, the commission did not publish autopsy photographs of the late President. Then-Chief Justice Earl Warren, then-panel chairman and the only commissioner who viewed the photos, concluded that they were too gruesome for the public to see.

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