The Most Durable Assassination Theory: Oswald Did It Alone

By Geoffrey C. Ward

ROUND lunchtime 30 years ago tomorrow, I was browsing in the downstairs stacks of the public library in Cambridge Mass., when a man appeared at the head of the stairs and announced, "The President's been shot."

It never crossed my mind that he could mean It never crossed my mind that he could mean the President of the United States; my first thought was to wonder why anyone should have wanted to shoot the president of Oberlin College, from which I had recently been graduated. I picked out a couple of books and went upstairs. The news was being discussed in low, library tones around the checkout desk, and I managed to overhear only enough to understand that my college's president hadn't been involved after all. involved after all.

Ah, I thought, then the victim must be the president of Harvard.

president of Harvard.

Only when I got outside and saw a knot of anguished people gathered around a parked car, its door open, its radio blaring bulletins from Dallas, did the full horror of what had happened hit me.

That an American President might be murdered was unthinkable in 1963. No sitting President had been shot since 1901; none had even been shot at large. (Hough a wayaldhe assassin missed President)

had been snot since 1991; none had even open about as since (though a would-be assassin missed Presi-dent-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933, and two more had been cut down trying to get to Harry Truman in 1950), And John Kennedy's youth and vigor and air of self-confidence had made him seem especially invulnerable.

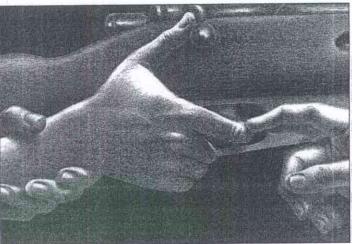
It is little wonder then that when the Warren Commission issued its report in 1964, naming Lee Harvey Oswald as the lone assassin and denying any previous link between him and his murderer, Jack Ruby, Americans were reluctant to believe it. The country had been traumatized by the assassination, then robbed of the emotional catharisis the accused assassin's trial could have provided. Such profound-

assassin's trial could have provided. Such profoundly unsettling events demanded a more sweeping explanation, a criminal conspiracy equal to the enormity of the crime. And over the years, as critics of the commission revealed that the C.LA. and F.B.I. had deliberately withheld information from its investigators — out of bureaucratic unwillingness to admit their own shortcomings or for more sinister reasons, depending on one's degree of skepticism — that linitial suspicion was set in stone.

Books ridiculing the official version of the assassination began appearing months before the commission report was in print, and they've been appearing ever since, some serious, some lurid, anny simply loony. There have already been some 2,000 volumes on the Kennedy assassination, according to Gerald Posner, the author of CASE CLOSED: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK; Random House, \$25, itself one of a baker's dozen of assassination books to appear this anniversary seaassassination books to appear this anniversary sea-

Most of them merely add to the confusion. For example, Gaeton Fonzi, a former investigator for the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which conducted its own inquiry in the late 1970's, which conducted its own inquiry in the late 1970's, charges the committee's chief counsel, G. Robert Blakey, with deliberately steering the investigation toward organized crime and away from the real villains, who Mr. Forzi believes were renegade agents within the C.LA. (THE LAST INVESTIGA-

Geoffrey C. Ward, the author of "A First-Class Temperament: The Emergence of Franklin Roose-velt," recently won an Emmy as principal writer for "The Kennedys." His "Tiger-Wallahs: Encounters With the Men Who Tried to Save the Greatest of the Great Cats" is being published next week.



TION: Thunder's Mouth, \$24.95). Jean Hill, a highly TION; Thunder's Mouth, \$24.95). Jean Hill, a highly imaginative eyewitness to the shooting who once asserted that the Kennedys had a "white, fluffy dog" between them in their limousine, now claims Lyndon Johnson was behind the whole thing (JFK: The Last Dissenting Witness, by Bill Sloan with Jean Hill; Pelican Publishing, \$17.95). (Her "proof": A police officer, now conveniently dead, once told her L.B.J. had seemed to him insufficiently heartbroken as he was driven away from Parkland Memorial Hospital.) Robert J. Groden, who is convinced that most of the Kennedy autopsy photographs and X-Hospital.) Robert J. Groden, who is convinced that most of the Kennedy autopsy photographs and X-rays are forgeries, has now produced a big coffeetable book (THE KILLING OF A PRESIDENT: The Complete Photographic Record of the JFK Assassination, the Conspiracy, and the Cover-Up; Viking, \$30), in which those ghastly exhibits may be savored in full color. Harrison Edward Livingstone, who once collaborated with Mr. Groden on "High Treas" an areasination best seller now posits a whole son," an assassination best seller, now posits a whole new set of traitors—his fellow authors of assassina-tion books, many of whom, he says, are actually disinformation specialists," paid to protect Lady Bird Johnson and other masterminds of the conspiracy (KILLING THE TRUTH: Deceit and Deception in the JFK Case; Carroll & Graf, \$27.95). WHO'S WHO IN THE JFK ASSASSINATION:

WHO'S WHO IN THE JFK ASSASSINATION:
An A-to-Z Encyclopedia, by Michael Benson; Citadel/Carol Publishing, paper, \$18.95 offers capsule
biographies of nearly 1,500 "essential people" connected to the Dallas tragedy, ranging from the
President's widow to the writer of a self-published
book alleging that a man with an umbrella used it to
fire a paralyzing dart into the President so that he'd
st still while being shot. Meanwhile, Peter Dale
Scott, a professor of English at Berkeley with a
stumingly coague style argues that responsibility Scott, a professor of English at Berkeley with a stunningly opaque style, argues that responsibility for the President's death rests with "deeper political processes, which have not yet been discerned." (DEEP POLITICS AND THE DEATH OF JFK; University of California, \$25).

It is evidence of our continuing national unease about the events in Dallas that Mr. Posner's book seems by far the most daring of the current crop, not because he has new explanations to offer or new suspects to name, but because he makes such a

persuasive case that, for all the Warren Commispersuasive case that, for an the waster Commission's sins, in the end it reached the right conclusions: as Mr. Posner carefully lays it out, the evidence seems overwhelming that Oswald did indeed murder the President all on his own, that his and

murder the President all on his own, that his and Ruby's were the case's only smoking guns.

Mr. Posner is not the first writer to make that argument, and although he conducted fresh interviews in the course of writing his book, much that he has to say in it has been said before. Still, it has never been said with such clarity or narrative skill, its is by far the most lucid and compelling account I have ever read of what probably did happen in Dallas — and what almost certainly did not. No serious historian who writes about the assassination in the future will be able to Ignore it.

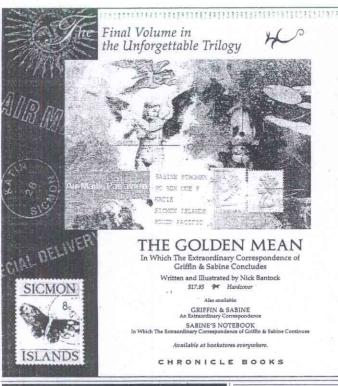
R. POSNER begins his account with Oswald's arrest for the murder, less than an hour and a half after Kennedy was fatally wounded; of J. D. Tippit, a Dallas police officer who stopped him on the street because his description matched that of the Kennedy shouter; he then traces the events of the tormented life that brought Oswald to that moment. Along the way, Mr. Posner challenges nearly every one of the conspiracists' assumptions. Oswald was a good shot, Mr. Posner insists, and he had plenty of time to get off the shots he needed: Oswald missed with the first one, he arruses, wounded the President and Gov. John Consultations. R. POSNER begins his account with he needed: Oswald missed with the first one, he argues, wounded the President and Gov. John Conally of Texas with the second, and killed Kennedy with the third. Employing common sense, computer analysis and crisp graphics, Mr. Posner demonstrates that the much derided "magic" builet did precisely what the Warren Commission said it did precisely what the Warren Commission said it did passed through the President, out his neck, and then caused all of Governor Connally's wounds."

And for all the fevered talk about snipers lurking along the "grassy knoll" or springing up from sewer drains, not one witness in Dealey Plaza claimed at the time to have seen anyone but Oswald fire a shot. The dramatic finding by the House Select Committee in 1978 that there was a "95 percent" likelihood that four shots had been fired at Kennedy

likelihood that four shots had been fired at Kennedy Continued on next page

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW 15











Song for Nobody A Memory Vision of Thomas Merton

by Ron Seitz

Coinciding with the 25th anniversary of Merton's dasht, Song for Nobodoyoffers a unique "remembrance portrait", written by close friend and fellow poet, Ron Seitz. Seitz shares currecounted moments from the final decade in the life of the monk and man whose spiritual journey became a model for millions worldwide.

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Oswald Did It Alone

Continued from preceding page

(proving he had been caught in a crossfire) was based on analysis of a police recording of a transmission from the radio of a motorcycle, supposedly in Dealey Plaza, that was later shown to have been miles from the murder scene.

Mr. Posner found no credible evidence that Oswald ever worked for the C.I.A., the K.G.B. or any other intelligence agency, and demonstrates that he received no special treatment from either American or Soviet authorities. He argues that there was never a "second Oswald" (as assorted theories resting on the existence of an impostor claim), and that the real one never knew David Ferrie, the bi-zarre right-wing pilot with al-leged Mafia connections, or Clay Shaw, the New Orleans business man, or any of the other shadowy figures who peopled the paranoid fantasies of Jim Garrison, the late district attorney of that city, or of his hagiographer, the film maker Oliver Stone. Nor is there anything concrete to suggest that Oswald ever had anything to do with the Mob

HAT drove him to mur-der, then? His own twisted personality, according to the author, the same grandiose inability to understand the real world and his own limited place in it that drives so many other inadequate human beings to violence.

human beings to violence.

Born in New Orleans in 1939,
Oswald never knew his father,
who died two months before his
birth, and he was raised by a mother so egomaniacal that she mother so egomaniacal that she would one day come to see the assassination itself merely as further evidence of the world's inexplicable neglect of her: "Let me tell you this," she told the writer Jean Stafford after her son's death, "if you research the life of Jesus Christ, you find that you never did hear anything

more about the mother of Jesus, Mary, after He was crucified. And really nobody has worried

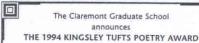
about my welfare."

Too erratic to hold a job for long, consumed by self-pity, blaming others always for her problems, Marguerite Oswald dragged her son from city to city (21 moves in 17 years), school to school (a dozen in all), setting the erratic course he would follow throughout his short, wetched life. Oswald was a friendless, beiligerent little boy. He frequently punched and once tried to stab his mother (in whose bed
he often slept until he was nearly
11); he hurled one knife at his
half brother and threatened a
sister-in-law with another the erratic course he would folsister-in-law with another, fought with his schoolmates, disrupted classes and stayed away from school so often he was fi-House in Manhattan for a psychi-atric examination. "I found him to have definite traits of dangerousness," the psychiatrist re-called when he testified before the Warren Commission, "a potential for explosive, aggressive, assaultive acting out." Asked whether he preferred the company of boys or girls, Oswald told the psychiatrist, "I dislike every-body."

He dropped out of school alto-gether at 16 because, he said, it could teach him nothing, and buried himself in books on Marx-ism instead, persuading himself that all the unhappiness and disthat all the unhappiness and dis-appointment that continued to corrode his life was somehow being caused by capitalism. At 17, he joined the Marines to get away from his mother, but he was unable ever to shake the sense of perpetual grievance with which she had imbued him, or his anger at a world that stub-bornly refused to grant him the or his anger at a world that stud-bornly refused to grant him the recognition she had taught him should be his.

Not surprisingly, the military did not suit him. Cold, sarcastic,

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The Claremont Graduate School invites submissions for the 1994 Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award. The saward of \$50,000 will be presented to the American poet whose work is judged most worthy by a national panel of distinguished judges.

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withdrawn, he was taunted as "Ozzie Rabbit" and "Mrs. Oswald" by his fellow marines, and was court-martialed and found guilty twice, first for shooting himself in the arm with a .22 pistol he was unauthorized to carry and again for pouring a drink over the head of a sergeant who had dared assign him to K.P. duty. He subsequently suf-fered an apparent breakdown, weeping and firing shots into the night while on guard duty. After

that he was called "Bugs."

By then he had decided to defect to the Soviet Union, sure his gifts would be recognized by the communists he had long admired. But, as his newly opened K.G.B. files make clear, the Soviets turned out to be no more admiring of him than his fellow Americans had been. He had to slash his wrists to keep from being expelled from the country once his tourist visa ran out. Two Soviet psychiatrists independ-ently declared him "mentally un-stable," according to Yuri Nosenko, a K.G.B. defector, and he was finally granted asylum only because the Soviets feared that if he succeeded in his next try at suicide, they might be blamed for murdering an American tourist.

and television factory in Minsk, where he met Mari-na Prusakova, the voman who was to become his wife, but quickly grew distilu-sioned with the grim reality of Soviet life and his own maddeningly obscure place within it. "He didn't want to be among the com-mon people," a Russian émigré who knew Oswald later in America remembered. "He thought since he was a defector and a former Marine Corpsman that he would be given special atten-

He returned to the United He returned to the United States in the spring of 1962 with his wife and infant daughter. He was a failure by any sane definition, virtually friendless, unable to hold on even to the menial jobs available to him, routinely battering his wife whom he forbade to hear. Failuish for fear held lose hear. Failuish for fear held lose. to learn English for fear he'd lose to learn English for rear ned one control of her. But in his own mind he evidently remained a fearless fighter for what he was soon calling the "radical futur-ist" cause. He tried but failed to shoot the eccentric right-wing general, Edwin Walker, in the appracrate belief that Walker was apparent belief that Walker was the harbinger of American fas-cism. He proclaimed himself head of a local chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee but failed to attract a single member. And he talked of hi-jacking a jet and forcing it to take him and his family to Cuba, which he had now persuaded himself was the only place he could find a revolutionary role apparent belief that Walker was could find a revolutionary role worthy of his talents; while in the grip of this last vision, he took to bounding about his home in his underwear, herding imaginary fellow passengers until his frightened wife began whisper-

ing to their daughter, "Our papa is out of his mind." In September 1963, Oswald

turned up in Mexico City, seeking a visa to enter Cuba and
bringing with him a fat dossier
he had compiled to impress the authorities: in it, he claimed to be a skilled translator, specialist in Street Agitation," "Radio Specker [sic] and Lecturer," organizer," ideologist, soldier and potential spy. Once the Cubans saw it, he assured his wife, he would be welcomed eagerly to Havana. "You laugh now," he told her, "but in 20 years when I am prime minister, we'll see how you laugh then."

The Cubans and Russians did authorities: in it, he claimed to be

The Cubans and Russians did not laugh; Oswald's visit was tod unnerving for that: he wept, shouted, pulled a revolver that he said he carried because the F.B.I. was out to kill him. His application was denied, nonethe-

In PASSPORT TO ASSASSI-NATION: The Never-Before-Told Story of Lee Harvey Oswald by the KGB Colonel Who Knew Him; Birch Lane/Carol Publish Him; Birch Lane/Carol Publishing, \$22-50, Oleg M. Nechipo-renko, a retired officer in the foreign intelligence division of the K.G.B. who was one of the three Soviet officials who interviewed Oswald in Mexico City, confirms Mr. Posner's version of his bizarre visit: "We decided we could not take Oswald seriously. His nervousness, ... his ram-bling and even nonsensical speech at times, his avoidance of answering specific questions and answering specific queetions and the shifts from strong agitation to depression gave us reason to believe that his mental state was unstable or that, at the very least, he suffered from a serious

least, he suffered from a serious nervous disorder."

The only Government on earth Oswald thought worthy of him had turned him away. He returned to Texas, humiliated and filled with anger at the bureaucrats who seemed to block his path no matter where he tried to. go. The truly frightening thing about what happened there a few weeks later, as Mr. Posner re-counts it, is not the notion that vast, murky forces somehow rule our lives, but that not even the greatest among us is safe when madness and sheer chance

happen to converge.

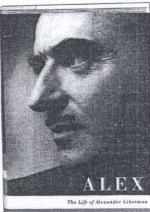
Had the Cubans granted Os-wald his visa, for example, he would probably have been in Ha-

wana by November, and we would not now know his name. Had any one of four potential employers to whom he applied for a job when he got back to

for a job when he got back to Texas decided to hire him, he would not have had the opportunity to fire upon the motorcade. Had a Dallas neighbor not innocently suggested to Marina's closest friend that there might be a job for Oswald at the Texas School Book Depository; had the friend not then followed up with a helpful telephone call to the man in charse: and had that man neiptui telephone call to the film in charge; and had that man— who had openings at two differ-ent locations— not happened to give Oswald the job at Dealey Continued on next page

The Life of Alexander Liberman

Painter, sculptor, photographer for half a century he has been the brilliant, legendary creative force behind the Condé Nast magazines and their impact on American fashion, style and culture.



DODIN KATANHAN AND CALVIS TOMEINS

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LEXANDER LIBERMAN. Russian-A born, elegant, shy, brilliant. He was 28 when he left Europe for America in 1940. Three years later he was Art Director of Vogue, and from 1962 to the present has been Editorial Director the creative heart and mysterious center - of all the Condé Nast magazines.

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Just as his exuberant and exotic second wife Tatiana would push him to succeed, his equally vivid actress mother early impelled him to paint. And Alex takes us into the New York art world, in which he established a separate career.

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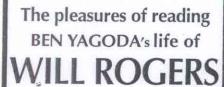
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Oswald Did It Alone

Continued from preceding page
Plaza, he would never have gained the vantage
point he needed.

And, it should be emphasized, Oswald won access to that sniper's perch more than a month before he could have known that the parade route would pass beneath it, an awkward fact under-standably left out of most books alleging that sinister forces conspired to put him within range. Sheer serendipity now offered him a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to strike at the heart of the system he believed the source of all his troubles, to alter history in a way even his wildest fantasies had not afforded him.
On the morning of Nov. 24, 1963, his uncharac-

teristic run of luck ran out: he asked to be allowed to change into a new sweater before reappearing before the television cameras, thereby delaying his own transfer from the city jail to the Dallas County own transfer from the city jail to the Dailsa County jail by nearly five minutes. Had he not done so, Jack Ruby (who had been sending a money order at the post office just up the street when the police would otherwise have been husting Oswald through the jail basement) would have arrived too late to shoot him — and to cheat us of the trial that might have helped lay to rest our worst fears about ourselves and our Government.

R. POSNER probes Ruby's motives as well, and believes he also acted entirely on his own. A nightclub owner and small-time promoter, he too hoped to make himself a hero and was fully convinced a country grieving for its President would cheer the killer's killer. (In the first minutes after shooting Oswald he must have

first minutes after shooting Oswald he must have thought he'd been right; when the crowd gathered across the street from the city jail learned what he had done, they broke into loud applause.)

Despite the cockiness of Mr. Posner's title, "Case Closed," the Kennedy case — like that of Abraham Lincoln, nearly a century older — is likely always to remain open. The crime will always outweigh the man accused of committing it. No one can ever establish beyond a resemble of the control o ways outweigh the man accused of committing it. No one can ever establish beyond a reasonable doubt that however weird Oswald was, he wasn't actually doing someone else's bidding when he carried the paper parcel containing his rifle to the sixth floor of the Book Depository, or that some-thing other than personal demons didn't drive Ruby



Lee Harvey and Marina Oswald leaving Minsk, U.S.S.R., for the United States in June 1962.

to murder him afterward. Thirty years after the event, no one already convinced of one or another of the conspiracy theories is likely to be converted by any narrative, no matter how carefully constructed or well documented. But whatever one thinks about Mr. Posner's conclusions, no fair-minded person should miss his footnotes. There, carefully segre-gated to keep from muddying his story, he offers a devastating record of the lengths to which sensationalists have gone to sow suspicion and sell books

omitting inconvenient facts, misrepresenting testimony, favoring stories grown more gaudy with the passing years over those first told when details were fresh, libeling the safely dead. Shame is out of were reas, noteing the satety dead. Sname is out of fashion these days, but perhaps it's not too much to hope that one or two of the authors Mr. Posner exposes — along with the editors and publishers who have profited from pedding their irresponsible wares — might suffer at least a momentary pang of embarrassment.

Still an Unthinkable Thought

When Gerald Posner decided to write a book about the assassination of John F. Ken-nedy, he wanted to identify the issues that were still outstanding almost 30 years later.

"The biggest story here would have been to come up with incontrovertible evidence of a conspiracy," he said. "I applied the same standards of evidence to both sides," It was only after Mr. Posner, who once was a Wall Street lawyer, spent close to 16 months comb-ing the written record and then conducted some 200 interviews that he was convinced he "could reach a conclusion" - that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone

That is why Mr. Posner was so surprised at the reaction to "Case Closed." In the two months since it was published, he has had letters accusing him of being a C.I.A. agent or of being on the Federal payroll. Someone has taken the trouble to find out his interview schedule and to fax belittling letters to radio stations. A computer network has asked members to try to discredit the book. In Bos-ton, a group of demonstrators gathered in front of his hotel with signs saying "Case Still Open - Posner's a Dupe."

He also has been surprised by the telephone calls in the middle of the night. Some have



Gerald Posner.

taunting, some obscene And he was surprised that much of the discus-sion of the book has centered on his account of what happened in Dea-ley Plaza, not his de-tailed profile of Oswald. And he was surprised at how little reaction greeted his interview the first ever — with Yuri Nosenko, a K.G.B.

agent who was kept by

American authorities in solitary confinement for two and a half years after he defected. But most unsettling have been the efforts to discredit him. "Perhaps my title is fighting words," he said. "It tells people who spent 20 or 30 years on the case that they wasted their

Mr. Posner pondered the national obsession with the assassination. "This is viewed as the great unsolved murder mystery of the gener-ation," he said. "It is hard for many to swallow the notion that a misguided loser with a \$12 ri-fle could end Camelot." KATHY ROSE