

# Who killed JFK?

thirty  
years  
later



the  
controversy  
rages on...

The Texas School Book Depository. The "magic bullet." The Zapruder film. The Warren Commission. To some people, those are not mere bits of sixties trivia; they are key elements in an ongoing debate over a murder that is arguably the most controversial crime of the 20th century.

Shortly after midday on Friday, November 22, 1963, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was shot and killed while riding in a motorcade through downtown Dallas, Texas. That much everyone agrees on; beyond that, agreement is hard to come by. A 24-year-old ex-Marine named Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested later that afternoon and charged with the president's assassination. Oswald, who worked at a book warehouse overlooking the motorcade route, had allegedly shot the president with a rifle from a sixth-floor window of that building. Two days later, while still in police custody, Oswald was himself shot and killed by Jack Ruby, the proprietor of two Dallas striptease clubs. From the moment of Oswald's death, if not before, suspicions of conspiracy and cover-up began to proliferate.

President Lyndon Johnson appointed a commission headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren to investigate Kennedy's murder. The Warren Commission, in a report published less than a year after the assassination, concluded that Oswald had fired the fatal shot and that he had acted alone.

In 1976, Congress set up a committee, chaired by Ohio Representative Louis Stokes, to look into the assassination. The Stokes Committee Report, issued in 1979, said that Oswald had indeed killed the president, but that he had probably been part of a conspiracy involving a second gunman.

In 1991, director Oliver Stone released the movie *JFK*, which propounded the theory that the president had been killed and Oswald framed by a massive conspiracy involving elements of the military, the CIA,

... Two  
alums  
hold  
radically  
different  
views.  
Both are  
convinced.  
Both  
cannot  
be right.

William Manchester '46



L. Fletcher Prouty '41

*Common Mass. Magazine* .....

BY CHARLES C. SMITH



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and other high-powered plotters.

Two UMass alumni, L. Fletcher Prouty '41 and William Manchester '46, have played prominent roles in the public debate over Kennedy's murder.

Prouty, a retired Air Force colonel who spent part of his career supplying military support for clandestine CIA operations, was an adviser to Stone on *JFK*. The year after the film came out, he published a book, *JFK: The CIA, Vietnam, and the Plot To Assassinate John F. Kennedy*, in which he set forth in detail some of the conspiracy theories that had inspired Stone's film. "Anyone with a few minutes of spare time can prove that Lee Harvey Oswald was not the lone assassin," Prouty writes. "It is clear from the abundant evidence that Lee Harvey Oswald did not kill President Kennedy."

Manchester, a history professor emeritus and writer-in-residence at Wesleyan University, has published, among other books, biographies of Kennedy, Douglas MacArthur, and Winston Churchill. His 1967 book, *The Death of a President*, took issue with some details of the Warren Report but agreed with the central conclusions that Oswald was the killer and that there had been no conspiracy. That book sold more than a million copies, earning, by the author's estimate, royalties of \$1.5 million, all of which he donated to the John F. Kennedy Library. Manchester considers Stone's film "outrageous" and is harshly critical of the conspiracy theories it embodies. "I know there wasn't a conspiracy," he declares. "The evidence against Lee Harvey Oswald is overwhelming."

We spoke to Prouty and Manchester and what follows is a presentation of their views. Each man believes that history will vindicate his view of the Kennedy assassination.

## Prouty

# Powerful forces engineered the killing

NO ONE WHO HAS SEEN *JFK* can forget Donald Sutherland's performance as "X," the mysterious figure who briefs Kevin Costner's Jim Garrison on the secrets behind the secrets behind the murder of President Kennedy. The model for Sutherland's character is a retired military man who started his career in Army ROTC at Massachusetts State College and rose over the next two decades to near the top of the Pentagon hierarchy.

The things he saw and heard in Washington's secret corridors of power led L. Fletcher Prouty to believe that many of the world's affairs are invisibly controlled by powerful figures cloaked in anonymity. When President John Kennedy was assassinated, Prouty felt almost at once that shadowy forces were at work and the truth was not being told. He was in New Zealand on an official trip, traveling with a member of Congress, when he learned of the death of his commander in chief. From the beginning, the incident aroused his suspicion.

"Naturally I had no really authentic information to go by," Prouty recalls, "but there was one thing that I turned to the Congressman and pointed out to him. There was a big picture in the paper of the building where the shots were fired from, allegedly, and I noticed that the windows were open on the building and I said, 'Something's wrong in Dallas. We don't allow windows to be open when the president is going by a high building.' So I got this strange feeling that something might have been a little wrong.

"Also the report in that New Zealand paper very clearly said 'three bursts of automatic weapon fire.' Then when I got back to the States and I found out they were saying that

one man with one gun fired three bullets, I could see the big difference between the immediate news release which went around the world and this allegation that Oswald had fired three shots. And from that day on I was very doubtful about the story that came out. And then when the Warren Commission Report came out in late '64, I knew it was nothing but contrived. There was just no way it could have been true."

### The mysterious character "X" in the film *JFK* was based on Fletcher Prouty.

Prouty did not immediately take up the task of setting the record straight about the president's murder. He did, however, decide to make public some of what he knew about the inner workings of government. To that end, he wrote his first book, *The Secret Team: The CIA and its Allies in Control of the United States and the World*. After that book came out, *Freedom*, a magazine published by the Church of Scientology, asked him to write an article about the CIA. That single assignment grew into a series of 19 articles detailing two decades of behind-the-scenes political and military activities from World War II to the Kennedy-Johnson years. Oliver Stone read Prouty's articles and contacted the author about working some of his ideas into a film on the Kennedy assassination.

"I never heard of Oliver Stone until he called me in July of '90," Prouty admits. "I'm not a moviegoer and I didn't know who he was, unfortunately. A nice fellow, but I didn't know him." Within a few months of Stone's first call, Prouty was reading a



draft of the *JFK* script and offering suggestions and comments on the film. He is pleased with the result of Stone's efforts. "I think it was very good. I think the intent of the movie was achieved, and that was to sort of say to people, 'Listen, for 30 years we've been fed a cover story that is absolutely untrue and we want you to wake up and see what some of the true facts are.' Well, I think we achieved that."

IN THE LATE 1930S AND EARLY 1940S, on the eve of the war that would usher in the atomic age, Army ROTC training on this campus still wore the riding habit of the previous century. By graduation day, 1941, when Second Lieutenant L. Fletcher Prouty received his diploma with orders to report for duty rolled up inside, he had been required to master the horseback skills of a cavalry officer. He had also earned a civil airplane pilot's license, an accomplishment that would profoundly influence the course of his military career. Soon after Pearl Harbor, he transferred from the Army to the Air Force; he saw wartime service as a transport pilot in Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific.

As he rose through the Air Force ranks in the decade after the war, he was eventually stationed at the Pentagon for the job that would give him his insider's perspective on clandestine government activity. "I was with the headquarters of the Air Force," he says. "I was with the Secretary of Defense, and I was with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I was chief of special operations, which means providing support for the CIA."

That is the background Prouty draws on when he concludes that the Kennedy assassination could not have been the work of a lone gunman. He believes that the government officials and private sector power brokers who engineered the killing are so highly placed and so well shielded by enormous wealth and carefully cultivated anonymity that neither he nor the general public will ever learn their identities. However, even without being able to name the conspirators, he sees ample reason to be convinced of their responsibility for Kennedy's death.

Their motive, he argues in his book, was provided in large part by Kennedy's plans to diminish the power of the CIA and curtail U.S. involvement in Vietnam, a move that would have meant many millions of dollars in lost contracts for helicopter manufacturers and other suppliers of military equipment.

Central to Prouty's assassination theory are two government documents. The first, National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) #263, was issued six weeks before Kennedy's death. In it, the president set forth his intention to recall 1,000 troops from Vietnam by the end of 1963 and to have all U.S. forces out of that country within two years. The withdrawal failed to materialize, Prouty says, because of a second document, NSAM #273, issued in the first days of the Johnson administration. That memorandum drew back from Kennedy's planned disengagement and set the stage for the subsequent escalation of the war.

"Had Kennedy lived," Prouty writes, "all the madness that happened in Vietnam after 1964 would not have taken place." It follows, he maintains, that the president was killed so the madness could proceed in accordance with the wishes of the military-industrial complex.

The power of the unknown conspirators who arranged for Kennedy's death can be seen, Prouty says, in their ability to manipulate events at the highest level. As evidence, he points to security shortcomings in Dallas (including the open windows along the motorcade route), to the large number of Cabinet members absent from the country on the day of the assassination, and especially to the speed with which the rap was pinned on Oswald and the staying power of the lone assassin story. "Anybody can shoot anybody," Prouty says. "But to maintain a worldwide cover story by the U.S. government that says year af-

ter year that nobody but Oswald with three bullets did this is an astounding bit of history, absolutely unparalleled bit of history."

In his book's scornful critique of the Warren Commission Report, Prouty dwells at length on the three bullets that Oswald allegedly fired. One of those bullets missed its target and struck the curb a block away, causing a superficial wound to a bystander who was hit by either a ricocheting bullet fragment or a flying shard of curbstone. Tracing this bullet's path backward from the point



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of impact, Prouty calculates that it cannot have been fired from Oswald's sixth-floor position above the motorcade route. Furthermore, Prouty finds it highly significant that someone had the power to arrange for the bullet-marred section of curb to be replaced the day after the shooting.

Mindful that any cabal powerful enough to kill the president and mastermind an extensive cover-up would be able to make quick work of a troublemaking retired colonel, Prouty admits that the thought of fatal repercussions did cross his mind as he was writing his book. "Since I worked so closely with the business, I know how it operates and, yeah, I thought about it. But I just thought it was something I ought to do and I did it."

continued ➔





## Rubbed out by the mob

HISTORY PROFESSOR STEPHEN OATES

has yet another view of the Kennedy assassination. Like L. Fletcher Prouty and Oliver Stone, Oates is convinced that Lee Harvey Oswald was part of a conspiracy. But like William Manchester, he rejects the notion of a military-industrial cabal murdering the president because of his Vietnam policies. "I think it involved the Mafia," Oates says.

Author of acclaimed biographies of a number of historical figures who died violently — including Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. — Oates is currently teaching the popular course "The Kennedy Era Through Film." Stone's controversial *JFK* is one of the films his students study, even though Oates does not buy the Stone-Prouty theory of a Vietnam-oriented Kennedy conspiracy.

The conspiracy theorists Oates finds most persuasive are those who argue that it was Mafia bosses rather than government plotters who had the strongest motive to be gunning for Kennedy. According to this line of conspiracy thinking, Mafia money and political clout had supported JFK's 1960 presidential race, and the CIA had enlisted mob aid to kill Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Because of these government alliances, the theory goes, organized crime leaders believed they could expect a certain immunity from prosecution for their illegal activities, so when Attorney General Robert Kennedy cracked down on Mafia prosecutions, mob bosses felt betrayed. "The Mafia really felt double-crossed by the Kennedys," Oates says, "and in the Mafia, the penalty for double-crossing is death."

Although Oates is personally convinced by the arguments for this Mafia conspiracy theory, he says with a scholar's caution, "We'll never know for sure."

## Manchester

# The only conclusion: Oswald acted alone

"I WOULD HAVE GIVEN MY RIGHT ARM to have found a conspiracy," William Manchester growls, "but I couldn't do it."

The first historian to study the JFK assassination in detail, Manchester spent three years in the mid-1960s delving into every aspect of the killing. Investigating at the request of the slain president's widow and his brother Robert, Manchester interviewed Kennedy's Secret Service bodyguards, FBI and CIA personnel, autopsy doctors, undertakers, Lee Harvey Oswald's co-workers at the Texas School Book Depository, the family with whom Oswald stayed the night before the shooting, and scores of others in and out of government. He retraced the route of the fatal Dallas motorcade, met with Abraham Zapruder for a frame-by-frame review of his famous assassination film, and questioned some of the Dallas community leaders most responsible for their city's reputation as a right-wing hotbed of anti-Kennedy hatred.

At the start of his investigation, Manchester urgently hoped that he would discover a conspiracy to murder the president. His heart rebelled against the notion that someone as insignificant, pathetic, and contemptible as Lee Harvey Oswald could single-handedly wrench the nation's history awry.

"I thought there must have been a conspiracy," he recalls. "To use what seems an odd aesthetic principle, if you put the murder of six million Jews in Eastern Europe on one side of the scale and on the other side of the scale you put the Nazis, the greatest gang of criminals ever to control a modern state, you have a rough bal-

ance - greatest crime, greatest criminals. But if you put the murder of the president of the United States on one side of the scale and put that wretched waif Oswald on the other side, it *does not balance*. You yearn to put something on the scale on Oswald's side."

Search as he might however, Manchester could find nothing to weight the scale and correct the balance. From all the evidence he could gather, he finally had to conclude that Oswald and Oswald alone had been re-

**At that distance, with that rifle and his experience, he could hardly have missed.**

sponsible for Kennedy's death. Today, a quarter of a century after publishing *The Death of a President*, he talks about conspiracy theorists ("demonologists" he calls them) with the gruff impatience of an evolutionary scientist dismissing creationists who demand equal time for Genesis in biology class. He sees *JFK* director Oliver Stone and other "demonologists" not as purveyors of a reasonable alternative theory but as fanatics with "no evidence whatever" to back up their views.

Manchester is especially disturbed by Stone's reliance on the 1979 Stokes Committee Report, which found a high probability of an assassination conspiracy. The sole support for that finding, he says, came from analysis of sounds transmitted over a Dallas police radio and recorded by dispatchers. Acoustical experts and computer scientists consulted by the Stokes Committee concluded that four of those indistinct taped sounds were rifle shots, three fired by Oswald, the fourth by a co-conspirator. However, Manchester says, that conclusion was subsequently dis-



credited by a more thorough scientific analysis of the same taped data.

After the release of the Stokes Committee Report, the Justice Department asked the National Science Foundation to study the key acoustical evidence. A committee of scientists chaired by Harvard professor Norman Ramsey was appointed in 1980. The Ramsey Committee Report, issued in 1982, declared that the four "rifle shots" heard by the Stokes Committee's experts were actually bursts of static, and that all four sounds were recorded after the president had been shot and his motorcade was headed for the hospital.

Although he still professes sympathy for those who don't want to believe that such a giant as Kennedy could be felled by such a pip-squeak as Oswald, Manchester insists that the facts of the case admit of no other reasonable interpretation. "The fact is that the evidence against Lee Harvey Oswald is overwhelming," he says. "People have forgotten how overwhelming it was."

He ticks off some of the incriminating details: A spectator along Kennedy's motorcade route saw Oswald firing his rifle from the Book Depository window and immediately gave a description to a motorcycle cop. On the basis of that description, radioed to all police units in Dallas, officer J.D. Tippit spotted Oswald 45 minutes later and attempted to detain him. A dozen witnesses saw Oswald shoot Tippit and flee the scene. Both the rifle that killed Kennedy and the revolver that killed Tippit were readily traceable to Oswald since he had bought them by mail and paid with money orders. The handgun was in his possession at the time of his arrest; the rifle was found at the Book Depository, in a sniper's nest full of Oswald's prints.

Having served in the Marine Corps during World War II and earned the top rating of expert rifleman, Manchester feels particularly well qualified to address the question of Oswald's marksmanship. In Marine rifle training, shooting at targets from 500, 300, and 200 yards, Oswald qualified as a sharpshooter, one notch below expert. "In the Marine Corps, he would be called a good shot," Manchester says.

"Among civilians, he would be called an excellent shot. And he had a sniper scope."

Oswald was firing an Italian military rifle mounted with a four-power telescopic sight, Manchester explains, so the presidential limousine, passing 88 yards from Oswald's window, was effectively only 22 yards away as he lined up his shots. "At that distance, with that rifle and his experience, he could hardly have missed."

On one important detail of the shooting, Manchester disagrees with the findings of the Warren Commission, which concluded that Oswald fired three shots. Manchester believes the assassin fired only twice. The first shot, he says, was the so-called "magic bullet" that passed through Kennedy's throat and went on to wound John Connally (the governor of Texas, who was riding with the president) in the torso, wrist, and thigh; the second was the fatal shot that tore off the top of Kennedy's head.


The "magic bullet" may be the single most controversial element of the assassination debate. Conspiracy theorists heap ridicule on the notion that one bullet could inflict so many wounds and later be discovered virtually undistorted on Governor Connally's stretcher. To Manchester, however, the behavior of that bullet "was unusual, but certainly not impossible. The bullet encountered soft tissue all the way, no bones, and therefore it went through Kennedy and then through the governor and was only slightly misshapen."

Manchester sees two major reasons for the enduring popularity of assassination conspiracy theories. The first is a craving for order, balance, and meaning in life; the second is the fact that Oswald was shot before he could come to trial. Jack Ruby, the strip club owner who gunned Oswald down in the Dallas police station, seems to many a bizarre figure whose actions are inexplicable outside the context of a massive conspiracy. But Manchester, who worked after World War II as a police reporter in Oklahoma City, says that what seems incomprehensibly odd to Easterners is actually pretty

run-of-the-mill in the Southwest, where police groupies like Ruby are familiar figures.

Ruby liked to hang out with Dallas cops, Manchester says, and was frequently in and out of the station. He even insinuated himself into the press conference at which the police showed Oswald to reporters a few hours after Kennedy's death. Under the circumstances, Manchester does not find it incredible that Ruby was



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able to enter the police station basement carrying a gun and approach Oswald at point-blank range. Furthermore, Manchester says, no amount of investigation has uncovered any link that might tie Oswald and Ruby together as part of a conspiracy.

Yet belief in a conspiracy persists. "I know that as of January 1991, 73 percent of the American people believed that there was a conspiracy," Manchester says. "Oliver Stone keeps quoting these figures on the number of people who believe it was a conspiracy, as though the truth were determined by a Gallup poll. I'm reconciled to the fact that in my lifetime the majority of the people are going to believe that. All I can hope to do is to reach the intelligent, well-educated people, and I think slowly, over hundreds of years, that the balance will shift." ■



# Noted

**M**useums make a klutz like me very nervous. Walking through an historical house decorated with valuable old pieces, I imagine myself pitching forward into the 18th-century highboy, or crashing into a corner cupboard full of Limoges china. When I entered Fenno House at Old Sturbridge Village one early morning to photograph powerhouse president Alberta Sebolt George (see p. 26), I innocently put down my coat down on an old wooden kitchen chair. As the curator of the house leapt forward with alarm, I realized that no matter how many little kids over the decades had covered that chair with sticky little prints, it was, at this moment, a precious object.

I know I'm hopelessly *déclassé*, but objects as such have never been of that much interest to me, no matter what their historical significance. Old Sturbridge tries to reach dolts like me with their authentically clad "interpreters" engaging in historically correct activities. But at this early hour, the only activity was a steady stream of costumed folk beating a path across the 18th-century common to ye olde coffee shoppe. So rather than threaten the furniture, I decided join them.

There I chatted with a large gentleman wearing a long cape and a top hat, who was devouring sticky buns and discussing cars with a woman who was aproned and ginghamed to a fare-thee-well and who wore one of those little white headpieces that look cloth pie plates. It was a relief to get into an atmosphere where the objects – paper cups, sugar packets, even his top hat – were obviously of modern construction and would not suffer unduly from the occasional attack of a swinging pocketbook or bulky parka sleeve.

I would have remained happily smug in my anti-object stance, had it not been for Jackie Kennedy's lavender notepaper. Several weeks later I was in Middletown, Connecticut with William Manchester discussing his book about the Kennedy assassination, *Death of President* (see p. 13). Manchester reached into a battered file cabinet and pulled out an envelope.

"Here," he barked. "Look at this."

I opened the envelope and pulled out several sheets of thick lavender notepaper, handwritten and signed by Jacqueline Kennedy. It began "Dear Bill" and was an eloquent, wrenching letter, written right after she had returned from burying her dead husband's brother, Robert Kennedy. I replaced the letter reverently in its envelope, swallowed the lump in my throat, and handed it back to Manchester, who casually returned it to his file cabinet.

I actually *handled history*, I thought, praying I hadn't left any fingerprints or crumbs from lunch on it. This letter is *precious*. It belongs in a *museum*. And I suddenly had a greater understanding of how those curators at Sturbridge feel about their antiques, about how Bob Cheney is so moved by hearing the same ticks and tocks from his clocks that were heard by people hundreds of years ago (see p. 28).

Because there is something powerful about experiencing "the real thing." The object itself does inspire a kind of reverence, but not so much for its material essence as for the human life it evokes. So some day when you or your children find Jackie's letter in a museum or archives, you, too, will be able to experience it as I did – and if you look carefully you just might see the faint mark of an ex-cynic's fingerprints. *RM*

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### ■ On the cover:

John F. Kennedy and

his wife Jackie aboard

the yacht *Manitou*,

in the Narragansett

Bay. This print is in

the collection of

William Manchester

'46. The original

image is in the

Kennedy Library in

Boston.