

Thirty years later, it's impossible to communicate my generation's sense of shock at JFK's assassination to the younger generation. They are more shockproof than we were.

Boston Globe

Nov 18 1993

p 23

The day that changed our world

ELLEN GOODMAN

We all know where we were. Every one of us over 55 can tell you what we were doing when we got the news. There are moments in life when the clock simply stops. There are events permanently imprinted on a generation, tattooed on a nation.

On Nov. 22, 1963, I was working, at my first job, in the wire room at Newsweek magazine. One of the teletype machines began to ping the way it did for a news bulletin. I walked to the back of the machine and read the words as they came over the wire, one at a time: "The President has been shot..."

Thirty years later, it's impossible to communicate my generation's sense of shock to the younger generation. They are more shockproof than we were. Those of us raised in the amniotic fluid of the 1950s had been sheltered from the knowledge of how vulnerable a country, a leader - a person - is to chance, madness, bullets.

Our own parents, who had grown up with the Depression and World War II, had tried to create a safer world for us - a vast, protected sitcom suburb in a country whose only threats were external. The American rebels of the '50s were without a cause and existentialism was as foreign as communism.

It is no accident that we still commemorate JFK's deathday and not his birthday. After all, it wasn't this complex and charming, youthful and flawed man, but his assassination, that exploded the safety of our American shelter.

In the surreal atmosphere of his death, we entered the same words, over and over: "I can't believe it." Eventually, that inability to believe it hardened into a refusal to believe it.

As Kennedy's biographer, William Manchester, has said, "If you put the murdered President of the United States on one side of a scale and that wretched waf Oswald on the other side, it doesn't balance. You want to add something weightier to Oswald.... A conspiracy would, of course, do the job nicely."

A week after Kennedy's death, after the arrest of Lee Harvey Oswald, after Jack Ruby shot Oswald, after one bizarre event piled on top of another, only a third of the American people believed that Oswald acted alone.

In the next decades, the need to make sense of the murder spawned a thousand conspiracy theories. The loose ends of the investigation were tied into 2,000 books. There are more board games, bumper stickers and conspiracy buffs than we can count.

The generation that had been shocked by JFK's death was horrified and numbed by the deaths of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King. We were hardened on the way from Dallas to Watergate to Iran-contra. Conspiracies became easier to believe and government harder to believe and Oliver Stone's "JFK" too easy to believe.

The truly alternative theory now is the one Gerald Posner spelled out in his book "Case Closed." He carefully reasoned the way along the path back to the irrational core of this case: to a loser named Lee Harvey Oswald.

Oswald was unwanted by his mother, by the Marine Corps, by the Russians, and by every employer he worked for. Oswald, in his own words,

was "born in Oct. 1939 in New Orleans, La. the son of an Insuraen (sic) Salesman whose early death left a far mean streak of independence (sic) brought on by neglect (sic)." He failed at everything he tried except one thing: killing Kennedy. If we can finally accept Oswald as the lone killer, it's not only because of Posner's thorough and hard-edge investigation, it's also because of our own changing times. We are forced to accept chaos as easily as conspiracy now. We understand that madness is as much a threat as any rational plot.

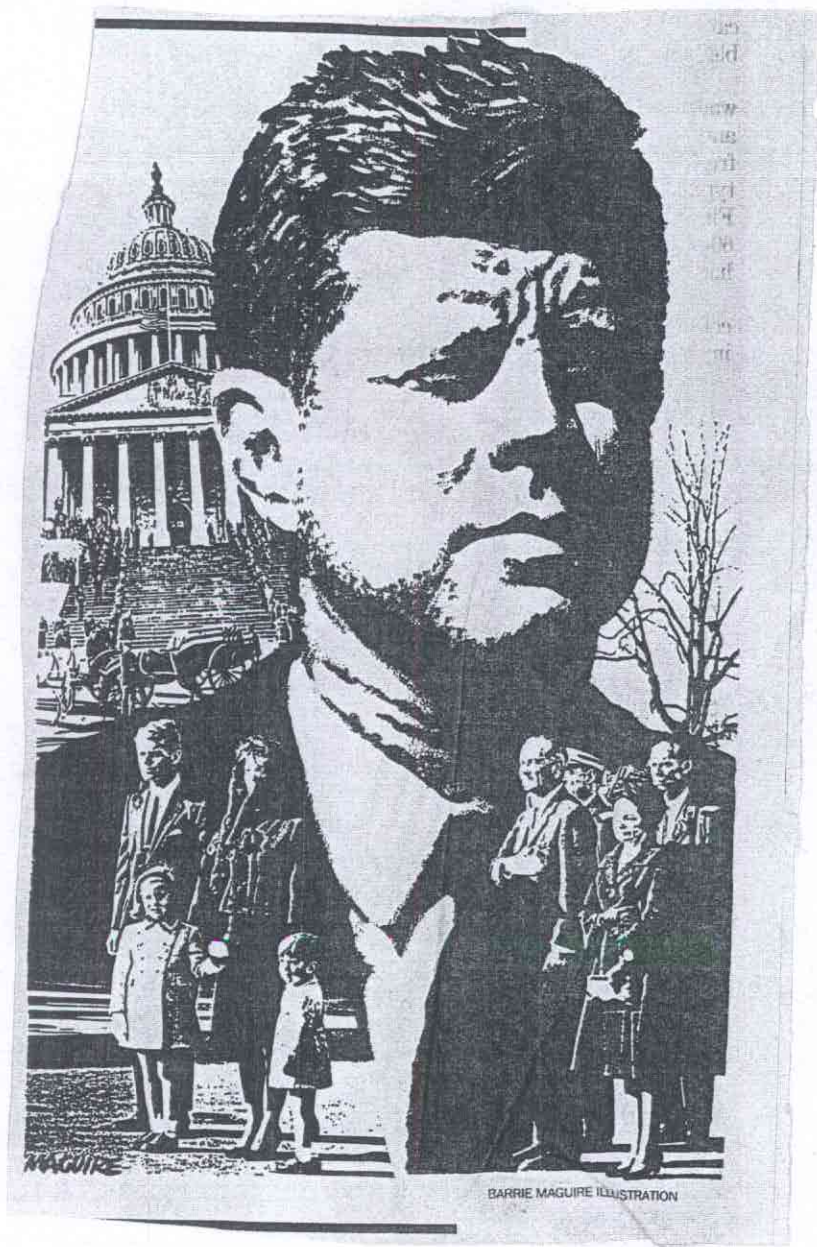
The two words, "senseless" and "violence," have adhered into one inseparable phrase. The generation now in its teens and twenties is chilled by the randomness of danger: drive-by shootings, children caught in the cross-fire, craziness on the streets. Even scientists now propound a chaos theory.

Jack Ruby, of all people, said, "It's hard to realize that a complete nothing, a zero like that could kill a man like President Kennedy." But today, perhaps we can read again about Oswald the loser, the abandoned and abusive sociopath, in the wrong place at the wrong moment, and recognize the profile of a killer.

On Nov. 22, 1963, while Americans were going about their daily lives, Lee Harvey Oswald took deadly aim from the sixth floor of the Texas Book Depository and changed our world in ways that still leave us wondering what might have been.

Unbelievable. We said to each other "I can't believe it. Only now, in a world of senseless violence, it's so much easier" to believe.

Ellen Goodman is a Globe columnist.



BARRIE MAGUIRE ILLUSTRATION