

# IN PRINT

## A shut and open case

By Pete Karman

After 30 years of undying controversy, the only thing that everyone who knows anything about the death of John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963, agrees about is that a minute or so after the fatal shots were fired in Dallas, Texas, at 12:30 pm CST, Lee Harvey Oswald popped a nickel into the soft drink machine on the second floor of the Texas School Book Depository building and got himself a Coke.

Was Oswald merely washing down his lunch, or had he just scampered down from the sixth floor after shooting the president of the United States? If he was the shooter, did he act alone? Was he a demented outsider or an insider turned patsy?

As things stand, a third of a century later, outsiders believe Kennedy's murder was an inside job, while insiders dismiss the outsiders as deluded. The outsiders consist of the great majority of the American people (some 77 percent, according to a 1992 CBS/New York Times poll), along with most sentient humans in the rest of the world. The insiders comprise a small but powerful coterie of top-level politicians, media heavies, cops, spooks and related national security types—the group, in other words, that the outsiders believe to be most likely to harbor those responsible for the conspiracy, or the cover-up, or both.

The aura of mystery still surrounding the president's death has produced an apparently unending boom of public writings on the homicide—more a condo than a cottage industry. These writings fall for the great part into three broad and overlapping categories: detective stories, fabrications and soap operas (the latter the form most favored by insiders). Unfortunately, only God and selected insiders have seen the vast trove of secret material on the JFK assassina-

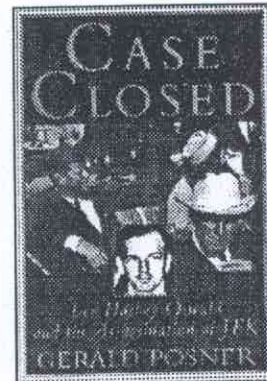
tion, which, if the continuing classification of papers on the Abraham Lincoln killing is any indication, is likely to be locked away forever by the government.

All but the soap operas start with the premise that there's more to the case than the official line: that, in what amounted to random and discrete bolts of lightning, ex-Marine Lee Harvey Oswald alone shot Kennedy—for no good reason—and then (just as mysteriously) was killed by gangster Jack Ruby alone—for no bad reason.

The best of the detective stories rely on traditional investigative tools to try to show that the Warren Commission report, the bible of the official line, is, in effect, a work of anti-mystery fiction. Whereas mysteries follow the evidence anywhere it leads to discover *whodunit*, works in the anti-mystery genre declare *hedunit* and then proceed to ignore or stamp out evidentiary trails that lead elsewhere. Not surprisingly, crime-savvy Americans haven't bought the hedunit story, apparently because it doesn't square with what they know from fact and fiction about cops and killers.

The outsiders attack the official line on two broad fronts, challenging the Commission's manipulation and suppression of physical evidence, as well as its methodical discounting of Oswald's and Ruby's personal histories, laden with intrigue and sinister associations. They also wonder why the murder of the century was accompanied by the most inept murder investigation of the century.

Why, they ask, is there no record of Oswald's interrogation? Why was Kennedy's autopsy so badly botched? Why, after 30 years, has not one test been able to reproduce the performance of the alleged murder weapon or the ability of its so-called "magic bullet" to do massive damage to



**Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK**  
By Gerald Posner  
Random House  
607 pp., \$25

**Deep Politics and the Death of JFK**  
By Peter Dale Scott  
University of California Press  
333 pp., \$25

**The Man Who Knew Too Much**  
By Dick Russell  
Carroll & Graf  
824 pp., \$27.95

**Who Shot JFK?**  
By Bob Callahan  
Illustrated by Mark Zingarelli  
Fireside/Simon & Schuster  
160 pp., \$12

bone and tissue yet remain pristine? And why, if the assassination was a case of simple murder, is so much of the evidence still an official secret?

One of the best works in the detective story genre is *Accessories After the Fact*, the recently reprinted landmark work by the late Sylvia Meagher, which pulverizes the Commission by pointing up its inconsistencies, omissions and false trails. Meagher long ago achieved near saintly status amongst assassination researchers for her diligence in producing the first index of the 26-volume supplement to the Commission report, as well as for her own sober and careful investigations.

There are a wealth of solid accounts in the detective genre. Books by Anthony Summers, Henry Hurt, Jim Marrs, as well as Robert Groden and Harrison Edward Livingstone, provide comprehensive and readable narrative accounts of the assassination, with the former widely regarded as among the most definitive and the latter particularly good on photographic evidence. David Lifton's *Best Evidence* is a painstaking guide to the mangled and apparently altered autopsy findings. Philip Melanson's *Spy Saga* provides a brief and brilliant portrait of Oswald, who, Melanson finds, was no pathetic loner but a fascinating character whose short life was packed with exotic circumstances and anomalous associations. Seth Kantor's *The Ruby Coverup* does a similar job of fleshing out the thin and uninquiring Ruby biographies promulgated by the insiders.

Among the better recent additions to the still-growing stack is Dick Russell's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. A massive effort, encompassing 17 years of research, the book revolves around Richard Case Nagell, a CIA contract agent, and his efforts first to thwart a purported JFK assassination plot and then, failing that, to remove himself from the conspiracy. There are lots of loose ends here, but the book provides a wealth of corroborative citations, offering a knowledgeable and nuanced description of the highly charged political atmosphere of the early '60s.

With masses of evidence either destroyed or locked away, and with the insiders unable to make a strong case for Oswald's singular guilt, conspiracy theories have proliferated. In response, the insiders have not so much challenged the theories themselves as they have ridiculed the very idea of a conspiracy.

Of course, conspiracy is nothing more or less than

agreement by two or more persons to commit crime. Though the U.S. is the most notoriously crime-ridden of the modern industrial states, the insiders maintain with straight faces that conspiracy is alien to America, and all but unknown at the highest levels of wealth and power. Therefore, those who entertain the possibility of conspiracy in events such as the Kennedy homicide are deluded or mischievous. This is, clearly, a self-serving argument, aimed at closing off inquiry; it has, rather, encouraged further suspicion and further questioning.

A few works come right out and make specific accusations. Mark Lane's *Plausible Denial* blames a CIA-led conspiracy for the murder of Kennedy. His vehicle is a Florida libel suit filed by ex-CIA operative and Watergate burglar H. Howard Hunt, who charged he had been defamed by accusations in a small right-wing magazine linking him to the assassination. Lane, a lawyer, defended the magazine in court and, marshaling a wealth of evidence, won the case. "We were compelled to conclude," the jury forewoman commented, "that the CIA had indeed killed President Kennedy."

Though the CIA is the usual suspect in conspiracy theories, it's not the only one. Other works give different weightings to various official and private groupings said to have been involved either directly or by way of acquiescence.

Some of the conspiracy theories seem too neat, and too contained in their scope, to be fully believable—in effect, they're seen as part of the cover-up. G. Robert Blakey and Richard Billings's *Fatal Hour*, which

indicts organized crime for the hit, is regarded by many within the community of assassination researchers as the outline for an official fallback position in the event of a collapse of the Commission, putting added heat on the next most likely suspects.

The thicket of JFK conspiracy theories is dense but passable. Newcomers to the genre may find a guide of sorts in *Who Shot JFK?*, a recent book by Bob Callahan and illustrator Mark Zingarelli that provides concise and informative summaries of the major plot lines, along with a good deal of fascinating additional information about the assassination. In many ways it's the best and most accessible beginner's book.

Those with good knowledge of the case will find that *Deep Politics*, Peter Dale Scott's newest work, offers perhaps the most useful synthesis yet of this particular skein of



Mark Zingarelli/Who Shot JFK?

history. Scott rejects the mechanical notions of "shadow governments" and secret cabals promoted by some of the cruder conspiracy theorists, exploring instead the long-established ties amongst various official and private power centers and their ability to achieve consensus in matters such as the removal of a national leader.

Scott's book is one of the rare few on the subject that bridges the gap between events on the surface and what he calls deep politics, that is, the behavior over time of institutions with the power to function beyond the constraints of legality. He doesn't indict likely culprits; rather, he helps us to comprehend the hidden underside of America's global political economy, with its huge, ongoing trade in money, militarism, narcotics and state power. Scott's brilliant, meticulously detailed lesson is, in a way, as much a guide to the current Iraqgate scandal as it is to the assassination.

The weedpatch of JFK fabrications grows mainly on TV exposé shows and in quickie books. The exploitative dross of the assassination field, they consist in great part of Mafioso memoirs, belated recollections by purported witnesses and gotcha tales by cultists and spooks aimed at discrediting particular countries, groups or individuals by tying them to the murder. Many of them, such as the recently ballyhooed remembrances of a woman who claims to have been Lyndon Johnson's mistress, contain interesting but often unprovable information.

Finally, we come to the soap opera version of the JFK homicide. This genre was first realized by an extraordinarily well-connected writer on intelligence subjects named Priscilla Johnson MacMillan. Jack Kennedy knew her in Washington and she knew Oswald in Moscow. She was permitted to become the chronicler of both Marina Oswald and Stalin's daughter Svetlana Alliluyeva whilst those women were sequestered by our government. Lane, in *Plausible Denial*, charges MacMillan with planting evidence in the JFK case.

Her book, for its part, steers clear of matters forensic and concentrates instead on those domestic. It assumes that

Oswald was the lone assassin and proceeds to find reasons appropriate to a script of *The Young and the Restless* for his mad and impulsive crime.

The latest soap entry and the current great whitewash hope of insiders still peddling the hedunit version is Gerald Posner's heavily flogged *Case Closed*. Adoringly received by the establishment media, it's the most ambitious effort yet to present a prosecution case against Oswald and no one but. As I write, armies of conspiracy-oriented researchers are busily tearing its arguments and evidence apart, their refutatory articles already beginning to appear in the JFK trade press.

Their work shouldn't be too difficult. A main weakness of Posner's book is that, to make its argument, it had to create a magical world in which all of Oswald's countless intelligence connections were accidental, benign or meaningless. Posner repeatedly assures readers that still secret files contain no interesting material. And, ignoring the Cold War, he finds it normal that a Marine who had publicly professed communism and defected to the USSR, where he married the ward of a Soviet secret police colonel, should on his return draw not interest but rather aid from official Washington and from a fascinating assortment of Russian and Cuban anticommunist exiles and spooks.

Posner, for his part, does pay a good deal of attention to the forensics, relying, for example, on the sort of computer modeling of trajectory tests that might impress those who have not yet learned the old computer adage: garbage in, garbage out.

Still, for all of its pages of loose ballistics tests and elastic anatomy demonstrations, *Case Closed* remains an effort at psychological accusation. Like MacMillan's book, upon which it is heavily dependent, Posner's work plays down or dismisses Oswald's intriguing career moves and immerses itself in his marital woes and what we are told was his brooding and confused inner life. Oswald, says Posner, carried out the assassination because he was a nut case.

The insiders have relied for 30 years on such soaps and anti-mysteries to convince Americans that there's less to the JFK assassination than meets the eye, that conspiracy is a foreign notion, that power is benign, and that to believe otherwise is to be a nut. A veritable library of much serious and some merely meretricious research challenges this nonsense at every turn.

Why does it matter who killed JFK? The easy answer is because it's a terrific mystery. The hard answer is that if Lee Harvey Oswald was not alone, then America is not being governed by its elected politicians but by hidden forces and powers, such as those we've seen operating over the years in Vietnam, Watergate and in the current Iraqgate scandal. The real question to ask, then, is more fundamental: are our votes and our Constitution worth more than the nickel Oswald stuck into that Coke machine? ◀

## Conspiracy-a-go-go

- The Warren Commission Report*, 1992, Marboro Books  
*Accessories After the Fact*, by Sylvia Meagher, 1992, Vintage Books  
*Conspiracy*, by Anthony Summers, 1992, Paragon House  
*Crossfire*, by Jim Marrs, 1989, Carroll & Graf  
*High Treason*, by Robert Groden and Harrison Edward Livingstone, 1990, Berkeley  
*Reasonable Doubt*, by Henry Hurt, 1986, Holt, Rinehart & Winston  
*Spy Saga*, by Phillip H. Melanson, 1990, Praeger  
*The Ruby Coverup*, by Seth Kantor, 1992, Zebra Books  
*Best Evidence*, by David Lifton, 1988, Carroll & Graf  
*Plausible Denial*, by Mark Lane, 1991, Thunder's Mouth Press  
*Fatal Hour*, by G. Robert Blakey and Richard Billings, 1992, Berkeley  
*Marina & Lee*, by Priscilla Johnson MacMillan, 1977, Harper & Row