

Thirty years after the assassination of John F Kennedy, Alexander Cockburn argues that Lee Harvey Oswald was motivated to kill by honest left-wing principles

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Propaganda of the deed

The entertainment industry has risen to the challenge of the 30th anniversary of John F Kennedy's death with no less than 11 documentaries or semi-fictional films. Aside from one on his childhood, these offerings are divided equally between studies of the assassination and reveries of the glory that was Camelot. Missing in all this is any assessment of JFK's achievements as President.

Time has not burnished his record. Kennedy looks worse as the years roll by. At the end of his recent book, *Rethinking Camelot*, Professor Noam Chomsky of MIT observed that: "In fact, there are striking resemblances between the Kennedy and Reagan administrations."

Both came to office after bogus campaigns about the threatening might of the Evil Empire. Kennedy manufactured the "missile gap" and launched a spiral of rising military spending. Reagan faithfully followed the same strategy. As Chester Bowles remarked of JFK, both were "full of belligerence, sort of looking for a chance to prove their muscle."

Both initiated regressive tax policies for the benefit of investors. Some Reaganites like Jack Kemp always frankly acknowledged Kennedy's pioneering exploits in "supply-side" economics.

At least the CBS film *Jack*, made by Nick and Peter Davis, punctured the myth of JFK as a crusader for civil rights. What aroused him most about the white racist rampages in Birmingham, Alabama, was the fear that the Soviet Union would obtain a propaganda advantage in the cold war.

It was the same cold war fear of the USSR that, two years to the day before his assassination, saw Kennedy decisively commit the United States to a war in Southeast Asia that led, over the next decade and a half, to about two million lives being lost across Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. On 22 November 1961, the President authorised the use of US forces "in a sharply increased effort to avoid a further deterioration of the situation in SVN (South Vietnam)."

The following year, 1962, saw Kennedy prompt a shift in the mission of the Latin American military from "hemispheric defense" to "internal security," providing the

infrastructure and training whereby this could be accomplished. As Charles Maechling, who led counter-insurgency and internal defense planning from 1961 to 1966 put it, this shift in mission led to a change from US toleration "of the rapacity and cruelty of the Latin American military" to "direct complicity" in "the methods of Heinrich Himmler's extermination squads."

Simultaneously Kennedy's Alliance for Progress began to force the economic "structural adjustment" programs that in turn prompted greater military oppression across Latin America, even as "economic miracles" prompted soaring unemployment, greater popular discontent, hence greater military oppression.

The Kennedy years saw six military coups overthrow popular regimes. In those Camelot years, the Central American death squads were conjured into being. The road from Ken-

edy to Reagan is well signposted. Like Reagan, Kennedy was enamoured of covert operations, nowhere more than in the attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro and topple his regime. Kennedy's courtiers have been sedulous in trying to claim that the President and his brother, Attorney General RFK,

were shielded from the CIA's sponsorship of Mafia hit teams and other assassination bids. Years later, Winn Taplin, a CIA career operations officer, acknowledged that following the Bay of Pigs, covert operation planning and control were taken into the White House and that "there were few in the Agency operational offices in the early 1960s who did not know that Robert Kennedy was the driving force on the special group working to topple Castro." If there was "ever a period in the Agency's existence when a president knew what the agency was doing," Taplin wrote, "it was during the Kennedy years."

Among the persons who had some inkling of what the President and the CIA were doing against Cuba was Lee Harvey Oswald.

Oswald subscribed to left-wing publications in the United States that discussed the secret war. In a radio debate in New Orleans on 21 August 1963, Oswald declared that "I and the Fair Play for Cuba Committee do think that the United States government, through certain agencies, mainly the State

Department and the CIA, has made monumental mistakes in its relations with Cuba."

This was at a time when the CIA was by no means the publicly identified and much-discussed institution it became after the revelations of the mid-1960s. Madame Diem, touring the US after the US-sponsored overthrow and murder, in October 1963, in Saigon, of her husband Ngo Dinh Diem, aroused widespread ridicule and disbelief when she charged the CIA with sponsoring the coup.

Oswald was well-informed and, as his wife Marina later reported, a news junkie. Resident in that city, he surely would have read an AP story in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* for 9 September 1963, quoting Castro as saying, in the story's words, "United States leaders would be in danger if they helped in any attempt to do away with leaders of Cuba." Just two months later in Dallas, Oswald noted the route of Kennedy's impending cavalcade through Dealey Plaza, as published in a local newspaper.

A year after Kennedy's death, Johnson ended the secret war against Cuba, remarking that the CIA had been running "a damned



Murder Inc down there." The rationality of Oswald's act was in sync with, in response to, the rationality of the Kennedy brothers' bids against Castro. On the day Oswald fired his Mannlicher-Carcano, a CIA officer in Paris was handing a Cuban agent a pen, filled with poison, with which to assassinate Castro. As Malcolm X famously said at the time of JFK's killing, "The chickens have come home to roost."

The notion of Oswald as a person who acted out of radical political motives runs against the propositions of conspiracy buffs that he was an agent of the right. It also challenges

what Warren commission lawyers used to call the "washing machine" construct of Oswald's personality, meaning that, if only he had been able to afford to buy Marina a washing machine, he would not have felt impelled to kill the President. To ascribe rationality to Oswald is to invest him with a comprehensible mission rather than the homicidal petulance of a psychopath.

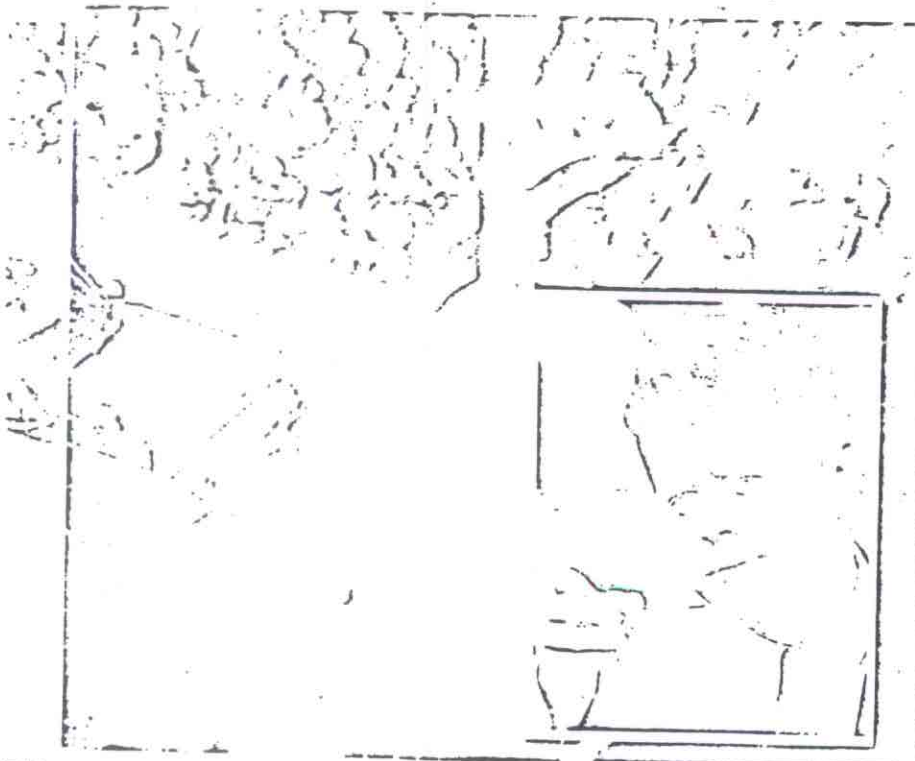
The left, in the immediate aftermath of the killing of Kennedy, was terrified it would be scapegoated. Most people initially thought Castro was responsible. In Washington, Johnson and his advisers rushed to cover up what they thought might turn out to be a Russian- or Cuban-inspired assassination, fearing that popular fury might end up with a nuclear stand-off. When the White House discovered that the Dallas district attorney was about to charge Oswald as a communist agent, Washington desperately and successfully quashed the charge.

Intelligence intercepts assured Johnson and his advisers that Castro was stunned by the killing and terrified that he would be held responsible. Fearful of nuclear war, the US elite insisted from the start that there was no

As Leon Day of Oakland recalled to me last year, "The witch-hunt was barely over in 1963, and the Smith Act and McCarran Act were at hand if the government wished to use them. In liberal New York City, the evening of the killing saw city police closing a legal and routine meeting of the Socialist Workers Party. Would the JFK killing provoke the internment of all radicals, as the Wall Street bombing had the Palmer raids of 1919? That night, none of us could be sure.

"For the first year or two after the killing most books and articles postulating a conspiracy came from left-wing publishers. This repeated almost exactly what the Louisiana Republicans had done in 1935 after one of their followers shot Huey Long. Not wishing to run as the assassination party, they spread the rumor that Long had really been shot by his own guards. Not only did this ploy work, but it's still working on some people to this very day, without a figleaf of fact to cover it."

So it is time, to use the phrase of E P Thompson most beloved by his obituarists, to rescue Oswald from the enormous condescension of posterity. Perhaps one day Oswald will be properly recognised as a leftist



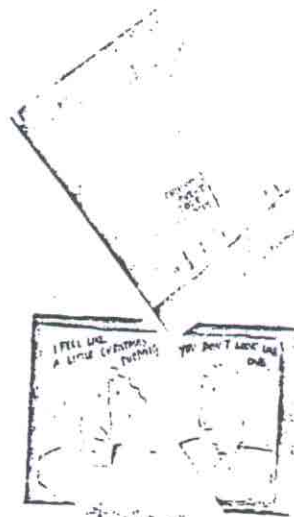
JFK rides through Dallas minutes before Oswald killed him. Inset: Kennedy became President by cold-war scare-mongering

international sponsor of the assassination.

Oswald was a subscriber to such periodicals as the *Militant*. He had described himself as a Marxist. In the brief period between his arrest and his murder by Jack Ruby he had given the clenched fist salute. My friend Frank Bardacke vividly remembers the frightened outrage this caused socialists in Berkeley on 23 November, when they saw the Communist salute on television.

who came to the conclusion that the only way to relieve the pressure on Cuba and obstruct the attempts to murder Castro was by killing Kennedy. In this calculation he was correct. A year and a half after the killing in Dallas, Johnson suspended the CIA's assassination and privately denounced the "Murder Inc" that the Kennedys had been running in the Caribbean. Oswald's ambush was one of the few effective assassinations in the history of such enterprises. Too bad that this radical exponent of propaganda of the deed should now be presented by assassination buffs as a pawn of the right.

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