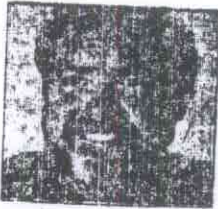


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Coming to grips with slippery facts about JFK's death



JOHN ANDERS

There was such an earnest, almost-pleading look in Ron Rice's eyes that I wished for a moment I could have believed every word he was saying.

Clearly, the general manager of the 4-month-old Conspiracy Museum in downtown Dallas was telling the truth — or, at least, his own version of it.

Personally, I've always been one of those kooks who subscribed to what is, at once, the most bizarre and mundane of JFK assassination theories: that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, etc.

And my visit to a new museum on Market Street across the block from the JFK Memorial failed to convince me otherwise.

According to most polls, people who accept as basic truth the findings of the Warren Commission are in the minority. But our radical minority is gaining converts every day, such as author Norman Mailer following research for his new book, Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery.

Growing acceptance

A former believer in a JFK murder conspiracy, Mr. Mailer now says there's a 75 percent chance that Oswald acted alone.

When a straw poll was conducted on the 30th anniversary of the assassination, 90 percent of a panel of local journalists voted in favor of the view that Oswald was Kennedy's killer.

Mind you, these were the reporters who originally covered the breaking story — many of whom knew some of the principals, such as Jack Ruby and local law officials. These were not authors who came to town later in hopes of assembling pieces for a conspiracy book.

"You know," says Ron Rice, looking suddenly exasperated as we walked out of his small, neat museum, "in a way, it doesn't matter. If you and I do a story on the front page of your newspaper, and we proved the honest-to-God truth about the assassination beyond a shadow of a doubt, people wouldn't like it, anyway. The great mystery would be over, and people love a mystery too much. That would be like reading the last page of a book and then giving away the ending."

This human tendency doesn't keep Mr. Rice from preaching his heartfelt street-corner gospel as he conducts the "JFK Walking Tour" from the starting point of the Conspiracy Museum just a few short blocks from the site where Kennedy was shot. The tour is part of the \$7 admission (\$3.50 for Dallas residents).

He estimates that visits to the assassination site are up more than 2 1/2 times since Oliver Stone's pro-conspiracy movie, JFK, was released in 1991.

Fixing the blame

Mr. Rice hopes to publish a book of the findings he has assembled over 18 years. Basically, he blames the FBI, the CIA and the Mafia for the murder and LBJ for the cover-up. His bottom line: "Six shots, four assassins, over a period of 5.6 seconds."

Mr. Rice showed me some fuzzy photos I couldn't make much sense of. Together we perused a Gideon Bible in which, according to Mr. Rice, the "go signal" was given for the assassination in the 23rd verse of the third chapter of II Kings.

In the basement of the Conspiracy Museum is an Oriental wall mural meant "to depict our Evidence of Conspiracy" according to museum literature. The "Three Dancing Men," the pamphlet explains, "are the Warren Commission giving us a song and dance."

A recorded narration declares that "conspiracy has controlled the Oval Office for 30 long years."

Or even longer: The first-floor exhibit deals with the Lincoln assassination, and there's a petition that visitors may sign, calling for an exhumation of the body of John Wilkes Booth.

I left the Conspiracy Museum a little dizzy and a little dazed and remembered what Norman Mailer said in a recent interview with this newspaper: "People who believe in large conspiracies have a desire for a perfect world. Even an evil world that's perfect is preferable to them than a chaotic world."

But then, in a perfect world we'd have no need for conspiracy or conspiracy theories.