

EXCHANGE.

COMMENTS UNLIMITED

Ithaca, N.Y.

I read Frank Donner's piece, "Conspiracies Unlimited" [*The Nation*, Dec. 22, 1979] with more than the usual interest. While I was Chief Counsel and Staff Director to the House Select Committee on Assassinations, Mr. Donner and I were in correspondence. On May 13, 1979, he wrote me that he "believe[d] that the Committee did a splendid job in its investigation. It is thorough and should not give rise to the sort of criticism which followed the Warren Commission." He noted that he had "no quarrel with the objectivity or thoroughness of the Committee's probe. . . ."

I responded on June 11, 1979, that I appreciated his "kind words," but that I "seriously doubt[ed] that . . . [the Committee's] work . . . [would] be treated any more charitably than the Warren Commission's. . . ."

Mr. Donner apparently had a change of heart between May and December. My opinion remains constant, and I suggest to your readers that if they are interested in the work of either the Warren Commission or the Select Committee they pay little attention to the critics Mr. Donner so rightly criticizes or to Mr. Donner himself. They should read what the Warren Commission as well as the Select Committee said, particularly on the issue of the second gunman and the acoustical evidence, which is neither "dubious" nor "infirm."

G. Robert Blakey
Professor of Law
Cornell Law School

ASSASSINATION INFORMED

Cambridge, Mass.

As a member of the Assassination Information Bureau, which Frank Donner dismisses with the coinage "conspiralogists," as well as author of *The Yankee and Cowboy War*, which he sneers at as "fiction," I must offer a few comments on his article.

First, Donner must not be allowed to get away with his amazingly ill-informed assertion that "the leaders and activist champions of the conspiracy constituency are drawn from the New Left," whom he depicts as "afflicted by a sense of loss" over "the declining radicalism of the 1960s."

I have been active on the J.F.K. assassination question for the last seven years, the last two on a full-time basis with the A.I.B. office in Washington, and I was also an early president of Students for a Democratic Society and a full-time antiwar activist throughout the 1960s. Thus, I can assure Donner that he is absolutely wrong about this. I am indeed quite alone among the old New Left crowd in being identified with the effort to reopen the J.F.K. case. In no way and at no time was this a popular issue with the New Left or any other kind of radicals. A few were sometimes-fascinated for a moment with what conspiracy research intimated of the underside of American political life, but no more than that, and certainly they formed no "conspiracy constituency."

Donner is also straight upside down when he writes that the whole J.F.K. movement is "a media hype." The A.I.B. kept close watch on what all media were saying about the development of the case in the hands of the House Select Committee on Assassinations. It is a fact that the media, particularly the print media, were all but uniformly hostile to the project, badly educated on the technical issues, contemptuous of the critics, tolerant of the committee only so long as they thought it would put the Warren findings back together, obtuse about the political significance of the case and unwilling even to understand the committee's evidence of conspiracy before condemning it as preposterous. Only one big-city paper in the entire country, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, editorially supported the assassination committee's work and faced the import of its finding of "probable conspiracy." The others—*The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*—conspicuously—either continue virtually to ignore the committee's findings or do as Donner does and flagrantly distort the arguments the committee's report advances.

Third, Donner is simply outrageous in his treatment of the technical evidence. As all surely know by now, the key piece of evidence developed by the House committee is an acoustical record of the actual Dealey Plaza gunfire. Donner doesn't like this evidence (of course), so without taking up at all what two different teams of top scientific experts told the committee about

this record, he merely opines that it is "highly dubious" and "infirm," just as though he had studied the matter and knew what he was talking about.

Donner knows by this time—the news broke after his article was on the stands—that the Justice Department has decided to reopen the J.F.K. case and that a basis for this decision was, precisely, the acoustical evidence that he so cavalierly derides.

Surely it is time for Donner and his side to admit that the facts have gone against them in this matter. Yet along with all prominent liberal commentators (Tom Wicker, for example), he chooses to deny the evidence and to try to bury the reader in tendentious, sophomoric and irrelevant attempts to psychoanalyze the critics of the lone-assassin theory.

We "conspiralogists" have persisted, he claims, because we are psychologically "threatened by the randomness of serious crimes," so that "we instinctively strive for an explanation of such acts as purposeful and rational" and are compelled by our character flaws to believe a President could be assassinated "only by a malignant counterforce, not by a random crank."

On the contrary, we have persisted because of the gaping weaknesses of the Warren Committee reconstruction of the crime and because of the political seriousness of the mystery still surrounding it. And what we had to persist *against*, every step of the way, is exactly the stubborn refusal to face facts, the dogged reassurance that high crime is almost certainly "random," that we see among all who think (like Donner) that American conspiracies began and ended with Watergate. Carl Oglesby

NOT CONVINCED

Interlaken, N.J.

Frank Donner's article unfortunately promotes the theme that the intelligence agencies of the nation have been trying to sell the American people ever since the assassinations of the 1960s: namely, that anyone who believes there were conspiracies must be some kind of nut or, worse, one who plays on irrational fears for monetary profit.

This theme has been promoted ever since the first wave of critical analysis

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exposed fallacies in the Warren Commission Report. Edward Epstein, whose *Inquest* had opened the door to such criticism, quickly turned around and wrote a *New Yorker* article labeling as "scavengers" other critics of the report. The scavenger theme was carried further in a well-promoted paperback book. And now Frank Donner has joined the chorus.

Such treatment ignores a fundamental fact—that acceptance of the "lone-assassin" verdicts in the murders of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. requires us to accept as logical and credible circumstances and evidence that are riddled with illogic. Since I was one of the first critics of the Warren Report, I suppose I might be considered suspect by the "scavenger" theorists, and so I'd like to cite the doubts of the high-level Federal Bureau of Investigation official who had overall responsibility for the assassination investigations.

The late William C. Sullivan, who was in charge of F.B.I. intelligence, disclosed his uneasiness with the "lone-assassin" verdicts in his book, *The Bureau: My Thirty Years in Hoover's FBI*. After describing how 2,800 agents worked on the riddle of Lee Harvey Oswald, Sullivan conceded that "there were huge gaps in the case, gaps we never did close." He added: "If I had to guess [italics mine] I'd say Oswald acted alone, but I was puzzled by the accuracy of his shooting. Oswald didn't have a record of being an outstanding marksman and yet he hit the President with two shots while his car was moving down the road. . . . I went to the book depository from which Oswald fired at the President and I looked out the window where he was positioned. I've been around guns all my life and I'm a reasonably good shot, but I must say that that would be quite a task for me. . . ."

Sirhan Sirhan's assassination of R.F.K. also left Sullivan with some disturbing doubts. "There were so many holes in the case," he wrote. "We never could account for Sirhan's presence in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel. Did he know Kennedy would be walking through?" And, it might be added, how could he have known in advance since Kennedy hadn't been supposed to take that route but was propelled through the kitchen in a last-second change of plans?

Sullivan's doubts about these two assassination verdicts pale beside his conviction that the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. had to involve a conspiracy. He was certain that James Earl Ray had fired the fatal shot, but, he wrote, "I doubt if he acted alone." Sullivan added: "Ray was so stupid that I don't think he could have robbed a five-and-ten cent store. . . . Someone, I feel sure, taught Ray how to get a false Canadian passport, how to get out of the country, and how to travel to Europe because he could never have managed it alone. . . ."

I have quoted Sullivan at length because his doubts about the validity of the "lone-assassin" verdicts are the best answer to the "scavenger" and "conspiracy nut" themes the intelligence community has been trying to promote for nearly fifteen years. Even granting that there are some conspiracy nuts and some scavengers, granting also that the recent House committee assassination investigation was flawed in many respects, there remain many valid reasons for haunting doubts about the assassinations that changed the political climate of our times for more than a decade. One does not have to be a conspiracy nut to feel that this issue is too important to be dismissed with the broad-brushed, backhanded treatment Frank Donner gave it. Fred J. Cook

CUI BONO BASIS

New York City

J.F.K.'s assassination came just in time. Shortly before his death, Kennedy had decided to withdraw from Vietnam and had announced that America's "advisers" would be recalled during the next two years. But his orders to do so could still be reversed. The campaign to repeal the tax benefits to the oil industry could still be halted. And a Presidential invitation to Castro to join in peace negotiations, which Castro had accepted on the day of Dealey Plaza, could be "put on ice," as McGeorge Bundy commented.

The official burial ceremony of John Kennedy's efforts to restore peace to Southeast Asia came on the same day as his funeral at a meeting of Kennedy's chief advisers on Vietnam, a meeting convened by L.B.J. after conferring with Bundy and John McCone. Present were Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Dean Rusk and Robert McNamara. L.B.J. was told that hard decisions

would have to be made if Vietnam was to be saved. Johnson responded that he wasn't going to see Southeast Asia go the way China had gone. So both the Vietnamese conflict and the arms race that Kennedy had been trying to wind down were escalated.

The armed forces and the war industries prospered, particularly in L.B.J.'s home state. By January 1968, Texas had moved from seventh to second of the states awarded defense contracts, nosing out New York.

The Vietnam War lobby was the chief beneficiary of the death of President Kennedy. Even in view of this brute fact, however, no one has—as yet—a basis for claiming that the Pentagon conspired in any way in the murder of the President. I am not advancing such a claim here. The evidence adduced by the House Select Committee on Assassinations more strongly suggests an organized-crime initiative. But it is noteworthy that several authors have considered the possibility that Pentagon and Central Intelligence Agency officials knew of the assassination conspiracy; the role that the military and intelligence played in covering up evidence that probably would have affected the findings of the Warren Commission would indicate that this may be true.

What I am saying—against Frank Donner and all other self-styled liberals who will not face the facts now before them—is (1) that the *prima facie* case for a second Dallas gunman has now been stated, (2) that the real investigation of the case has scarcely begun and (3) that the application of the time-honored legal principle of *cui bono*, who profits, is a legitimate basis for demanding a full, open investigation of proven military and C.I.A. suppression of J.F.K. evidence. Jo Pomerance

DONNER REPLIES

South Norwalk, Conn.

First, to the House Select Committee. My letter to Professor Blakey dealt only

ADDENDUM

Richard J. Barnett's article, "The Profits of Hunger" (*The Nation*, Feb. 9), was excerpted from *The Politics of Human Rights*, edited by Paula R. Neuberger, and published as a UNA-USA Book, New York University Press, fall 1980.

with the committee's investigation, not its final report, a copy of which I requested in my letter. Professor Blakey has chosen to omit the portion of my letter that complained that the entire investigation, thorough as it was, lacked a legislative purpose. This criticism was corroborated in my view by the subsequently released materials and staff reports reflecting wholly nonlegislative investigative tactics, including the attempted use of the subpoena power to compel John Ray to give testimony about his involvement in a bank robbery. My subsequent study of the committee's final report, the conclusions which it drew from its investigation, convinced me that it had drawn conspiracy inferences unwarranted by the facts uncovered by its investigation.

Mr. Oglesby, it seems to me, protests too much. To be sure, Movement activists and followers and their successors may not have made a campaign "to reopen the J.F.K. case" a priority. But it cannot be said that the conspiracy thesis and the rejection of the Warren Commission Report were not popular issues on the left. One has only to consult the files of such publications as *Ramparts* and *New Times* and note the proliferation of commissions and committees of inquiry, the enthusiastic audiences in crowded campus lecture halls, demonstrations, day-long conferences and lobbying efforts. As Ron Dorfman wrote in these pages in an article quoting Mr. Oglesby extensively ("The Truth Is Bad Enough," July 30, 1973), "It is distressing that so much of the Left is a push-over for conspiracy theories. . . ."

My claims about the role of the media cannot fairly be contested by the negative response of the press to the committee's report. It deserved no more. In any event, Mr. Oglesby misses the point: For about a decade the media gave generous coverage of and access to the conspiracy thesis. Almost all of the 150 books (mostly paperback) my article refers to, TV news reports, documentaries, interviews and an outpouring of articles in an assortment of periodicals, as documented in the columns of the *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature*, kept the conspiracy issue alive and kicking. Indeed, a California mail-order house specializes in supplying conspiracy literature to a left readership.

As for my "sophomoric" discussion of the social response to the assassination of public figures, I suggest that *Nation* readers consult my article before

accepting Mr. Oglesby's distorted version of my observations, which simply distill the research of respected social scientists. Simply put, the refusal of people to accept the fact that three beloved leaders suffered mean deaths has resulted in the emergence of a conspiracy consensus. This consensus is reflected in Gallup polls. It also explains the House decision to authorize the investigation and contributed to the Select Committee's strained conclusions discussed in my article. Mr. Oglesby appears to have confused this socially rooted phenomenon with the separate issue of the left's politicization of the conspiracy thesis.

My "outrageous" treatment of the acoustical evidence ("acoustic bursts of amplitude") likewise reflects expert opinion which rejects such evidence as worthless without corroboration both with respect to its gunfire source and its Dealey Plaza origin. And even such dual corroboration will leave unresolved the core question of conspiracy—whether the two shooters were participants in a plot conceived and orchestrated by others.

Finally, the Justice Department has not decided to reopen the case "because it was convinced by the acoustical evidence" or for any other reason. This is yet another of Mr. Oglesby's overstatements. On January 5 of this year the Justice Department informed Representative Louis Stokes, chairman of the Select Committee, that it had asked the Federal Bureau of Investigation to conduct a "limited investigation" into several aspects of the assassination and that the National Science Foundation would be requested to help arrange an "independent scientific review" of the acoustical findings.

Fred Cook deplors reliance on intelligence sources—except for those he agrees with. William C. Sullivan is totally unworthy of such selective preference for reasons I have detailed in a review of his book ("Oedipus Cowed," *The Nation*, Oct. 20, 1979). As every criminal lawyer knows, a great many cases have "holes," fact patterns that do not conform to reasonable expectations, remote contingencies that are perversely resolved against the odds. Indeed, the reconstruction of the death of Sullivan himself in a hunting accident in November 1977 has been rejected by conspiraphiles as too full of holes to believe. (How was it possible for Sullivan's movements in the woods to con-

fuse a fellow hunter—the son of a police officer!—into mistaking him for a deer?)

Lee Harvey Oswald's poor marksmanship was once a fertile source of doubt about his role, but the Select Committee's investigation establishes conclusively that he fired all the fatal shots. Sirhan Sirhan proceeded to the Ambassador Hotel's Coconut Grove after reading an announcement of the Kennedy rally (a press clipping was found in his pocket). His presence in the kitchen is explained by the fact that it abutted on a rear door which he could enter unobserved, an understandable precaution in view of his mission. The last-minute decision of the Kennedy party to exit via the kitchen is another one of those twists of fate. Surely this explanation is more plausible than the Sullivan-Cook hypothesis that an accomplice (presumably a member of the Kennedy entourage) tipped Sirhan off to station himself in the kitchen in anticipation of a last-minute rerouting decision.

Sullivan's "Ray-must-have-had-help" thesis is wholly speculative, without a shred of factual support. Ray was far from stupid—especially about such matters as the planning of an escape. What he lacked, as I tried to show in my article, were the resources to assess the risk of detection in the commission of the crime, a restraint submerged by his bigotry. George McMillan's painstaking study (*Making of an Assassin*) clearly shows that Ray was quite capable of developing and implementing a flight plan on his own. In fact, he had previously blueprinted his escape in a special trip to Canada where he developed a bogus identity in preparation for his future moves.

Ms. Pomerance's list of *cui bono* suspects and investigative targets could be greatly extended. Why leave out the steel industry and the sugar lobby? And what about L.B.J. and J. Edgar Hoover? Ms. Pomerance's objections require not yet another investigation but a parlor game, CUI BONO—ANY NUMBER CAN PLAY. The conspiraphiles arrayed against the "self-styled liberals"; what a way to pass the long winter nights secluded from the political challenges that confront us!

In all three assassinations "no villain need be" other than the acknowledged killers—maimed victims of disordered lives. They murdered strangers for strange, frightening reasons. Why are we so reluctant to accept that fact?

Frank Donner