

THIRTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, JOHN F. KENNEDY was killed in Dallas, Texas. Lee Harvey Oswald, an enigmatic drifter who had once defected to Russia and then re-defected to the United States, was charged with the murder. Two days later, he was gunned down by Jack Ruby. And life has not been the same ever since.

Those three days are likely the most analyzed time period in U.S. history. Virtually every action and reaction has been scrutinized under a magnifying glass. How could Oswald have done this? Did he act alone? Or was there more than one killer? Could a lone nut take out the most powerful man on Earth? How could someone put an end to Camelot?

The social setting was ripe for fears of conspiracy. The Cold War was at its height. Russia's Khrushchev and Cuba's Fidel Castro loved to engage in saber rattling. Robert Kennedy, the President's younger brother, had declared war on the Mafia. And various right-wing groups in the U.S. were upset by Kennedy's support for racial integration and felt the Bay of Pigs invasion had been bungled.

These fears and uncertainties, along with the inscrutable Oswald, opened the door for a rash of conspiracy theories. Oswald had dozens of bizarre relationships and odd incidents attached to his name, each one seemingly implicating him in a conspiracy to kill the President. It was all too easy to think that someone else was involved. Any number of individuals or groups had both motive and means to kill the president, either with or without Oswald.

If ever there were a person of questionable character or background, it was Oswald. Here was a man who had embraced extremist political ideology and campaigned publicly in favor of Castro, who had used an alias in ordering a rifle from a mail order company, and who posed in his backyard brandishing firearms and propaganda leaflets.

Skeptics of the Warren Commission report have speculated widely (and wildly) that Oswald must have had backers from the far right, or even that he was a fall guy for a subversive plot to kill the president. Others have postulated that there were multiple Oswalds, with decoys being used in various places to leave a confusing trail of

TRAGEDY ON ELM STREET



FACTS AND FICTIONS IN THE JFK ASSASSINATION

By Nick Gerlich

evidence. But the facts simply do not bear this out. While many have been swept up in the JFK conspiracy hysteria (over 2000 books have been published on the subject since his death), a careful analysis confirms, in my opinion, that Oswald acted alone.

After 35 years, there is little that's new to be added. Occasionally a "witness" comes forward (either with a new book, or in an exposé in the *National Enquirer*), to announce that they were involved with the assassination, or that they knew Oswald, Ruby, or one of the other unsavory characters. Recently-released documents shed some light on aspects of the assassination, but as the author of the definitive lone-assassin book, Gerald Posner, pointed out on a *Today Show* interview on October 1, 1998, the documents merely help explain some of the anomalies in the case. For example, much has been made of why the autopsy was conducted under such a veil of secrecy and intrigue. It turns out, says Posner, that the Kennedy family did not want anyone to discover that the President was suffering from Addison's disease during his Presidency, not to mention the gruesome nature of the corpse photographs—an explanation that is, even by conspirator-

realists' standards, certainly understandable. These new documents do nothing to change Posner's (or my) conclusion that Oswald was the only assassin in Dealey Plaza that day. The case is still closed.

The purpose of this article is to examine the many truths and non-truths surrounding the JFK assassination, and to take a closer look at some of the circumstances that led people to believe a conspiracy had occurred. I will explore some of the most frequently cited aspects of the case and consider the controversial elements of each. After pursuing this story now for many, many years, I have come to one definitive, irrefutable conclusion I believe will not change: the JFK assassination case will never be put to rest. Whether the case is really closed, as I think it is, or still open pending proof of a second smoking gun, many people just cannot seem to let it go. The president's body was buried in 1963, but the intrigue surrounding his death, like its emotional counterpart in the images of his good looks and inimitable charm, has not and likely never will be interred. The mystery has become more powerful than its solution.

THE ZAPRUDER FILM

Perhaps the best-known and most-analyzed piece of evidence from the assassination is the Zapruder film. It is the best of several film recordings of the Presidential motorcade as it wound its way through downtown Dallas.

Abraham Zapruder, a Dallas dressmaker, unwittingly stepped into American history with his then-high tech capture of the event. At the time, 8mm film cameras were rising in popularity and Zapruder became one of the first Americans to document a crime with this method of technology.

Perched on the grassy knoll just a few hundred feet from the Texas School Book Depository, Zapruder stood poised to film the president as he made the curve down Elm Street just before the triple underpass leading to the Stemmons Freeway. The gentle bend in the road allowed Zapruder an excellent angle for photography; were it not for a highway sign, his film would have been totally unobscured.

The Zapruder film, which recently became available in VHS and DVD format, showed one thing that caught conspiracy-buffs' attention: the forward motion of the President's body following the first bullet to hit him, and then the backward jerking motion of Kennedy's head, with flesh and blood splattering toward the back of the limousine. C-buffs concluded that the second hit must therefore have come from behind Zapruder, possibly behind the picket fence on the grassy knoll.

But speculation about the Zapruder film did not end there. The day after the assassination, Zapruder sold all rights to the film to *Life* magazine for the then-impressive sum of \$150,000. Some extreme skeptics of the Warren Commission feel that this is where the case went awry. Harrison Livingstone (1992), for example, contends that the film was then tinkered with, in a frame-by-frame fashion to alter the placement of the head wound. Livingstone contends that Kennedy was shot in the neck from the front, and then in the head simultaneously from two different directions (the second assassin stationed in a manhole just down the road from Kennedy).

Livingstone's wildest fantasy is that the film is not authentic. He contends that the CIA's photographic division processed and printed the film the night of the assassination, and that Zapruder was actually a minor footnote in history, a possessor of a mere copy of the now-altered original. The CIA, Livingstone contends, had the means in the early 1960s to add, delete, and rearrange frames, as well as add special effects. The film shown to the Warren Commission and to the American public was thus a fake, carefully reconstructed to bolster the lone gunman argument. Similarly, Groden and Livingstone (1989), Lifton (1980), and numerous others argue that the film has been spliced, with numerous frames now out of sequence. They use the fact that the movie camera shot at the rate of 18.3 frames per second to help build a time line, and then compare it to the time required to operate Oswald's weapon, the pre-WWII

Mannlicher-Carcano bolt-action rifle.

As Posner (1993) points out, though, it was not only possible for Oswald to fire three shots in under six seconds, it was also a quite manageable feat. He cites the House Select Committee's 1977 simulation which showed that only 3.3 seconds were needed to squeeze off three effective shots if the first bullet was already loaded in the chamber. The awkward bolt action of the rifle was not as much of a problem as the critics claim it is.

The critical Zapruder frame was #313, the moment at which Kennedy's head virtually exploded. Nearly everyone is in agreement that this records the final shot. Working backwards, analysts concluded that no more than six seconds elapsed between the film image on Elm Street just clear of the large oak tree in front of the Texas School Book Depository sniper's nest and the spot where frame #313 was captured.

But Posner, analyzing both ear-witness reports and an enhanced Zapruder film, shows that Oswald fired his first shot at frame #160, before the President's car was obscured by the large tree. Furthermore, Posner shows that the first shot entirely missed Kennedy, but that the second and third shots hit their target.

Of the various interpretations and analyses of the Zapruder film, Posner's makes the most sense. He shows that Zapruder slightly jerked the camera around frame #160, coincident with a possible first shot. Zapruder altogether made four slight twitches with the camera, including one at frame #313.

Furthermore, the notion that Dealey Plaza was literally crawling with snipers is preposterous. Gunmen were supposed to be hiding in manholes, behind picket fences, or atop other nearby buildings. While it may be possible for one person to go unseen, for two or more to do so becomes far less likely. For an entire posse of marksmen to leave the Plaza unnoticed is a flight of fancy.

The compact, bowl-like terrain in the Plaza makes it easy for spectators to mistakenly attribute the source of various sounds. The tall buildings and other features create disorienting echoes, thus explaining why people in the Plaza started running toward the grassy knoll following the final shot.

Finally, to allege conspiratorial alteration of the Zapruder film by the CIA is totally unfounded. There is no proof that the CIA or anyone else had possession of the film, and until such proof exists, we can conclude only one thing—Zapruder's camera did not blink.

While amateur filming of newsworthy events is today part and parcel of our electronic age, Zapruder will be remembered as one of the first to record a significant event on film. His footage is a remarkable and graphic record of the assassination, and thanks to modern computer enhancements, it serves as proof positive that the two shots that hit Kennedy came from behind him, not from elsewhere in the Plaza.

THE MAGIC BULLET

If anything has given conspiracy advocates fuel for their engine (and even something to snicker about, to boot), it is the so-called "magic bullet theory." According to the Warren Commission, only three shots were fired, and the first of those three shots entirely missed its target. Both of the next two bullets struck President Kennedy, the last one causing his head to explode. The effect of this third bullet is not in question.

The second bullet fired is the problematic one. In addition to the president being struck, Governor Connally, riding in front of the president, was also hit. The second shot causes problems for the "Oswald did it alone" theory since bullet number two hit both Kennedy and Connally. According to the Commission, the bullet first entered the President's upper back and exited through his throat, and then, continuing its downward trajectory, it entered Connally behind his right armpit, shattered his fifth rib, exited his chest below the right nipple, shattered his right wrist, and finally lodged in his left thigh.

The "fake right, go left" tenor of this account begins to sound like a trick high school football play, and has conspiracy buffs writhing with laughter at the prospect of a bullet that could do somersaults in flight, as well as turn on a dime. To add another giggle to the laugh track, the bullet managed to wiggle out of Connally's thigh, and was later found on a stretcher in the hospital corridor, in nearly perfect condition (the so-called magic or pristine bullet is more appropriately referred to as Commission Exhibit 399). It is argued that this single bullet could not have done all this damage, so there must have been an additional sniper shooting at that time, and, hence, a conspiracy.

Pro-conspiracy devotees use the so-called Magic Bullet theory as one of their main arguments that the Warren Commission's findings are false. To them, it is utterly preposterous to propose that a single bullet fired from a dated, WWII rifle could perform the damage it did while dancing through Kennedy and Connally. There is no shortage of theorists who have examined the Magic Bullet, as well as Dealey Plaza, and they invariably come up with more than three bullets being fired, mostly because they will not accept the Warren

Commission's conclusions on the pristine bullet. Typical of these critics is Roberts (1994), a former Marine sniper in the Vietnam War, who dismisses the Commission's finding on the grounds that, because he could not duplicate the feat, it did not happen.

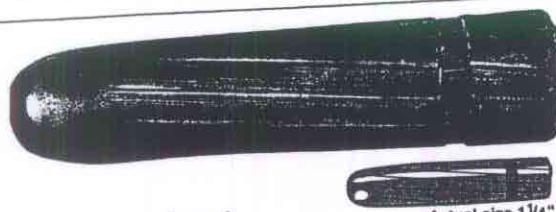
But as preposterous as the Magic Bullet theory may sound to even the lone gunman camp, it is the best conclusion we have. Of all the aspects of the assassination picked apart by the Commission and its critics, the path of the bullets fired in Dealey Plaza has been diagrammed with exacting detail, taking into account everything—the pitch of the road, the live oak tree partially obstructing Oswald's view from the sixth story of the Texas School Book Depository (which was still bearing leaves in late November), the speed of the limousine, the positions of both Kennedy and Connally in the limousine, and the location of entry and exit wounds in both persons.

As Posner showed by examination of the Zapruder film, it was possible for Oswald (or anyone else experienced with rifles, for that matter) to squeeze off the three necessary shots with the Mannlicher-Carcano. Posner also shows convincingly that the second shot hit both men.

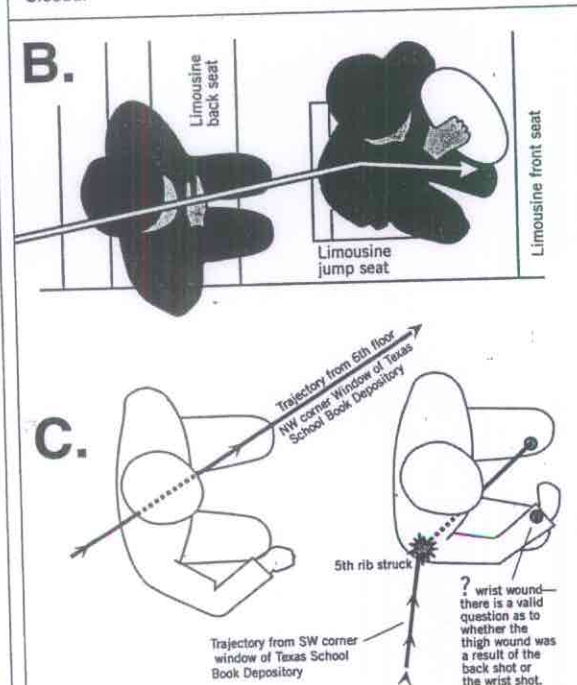
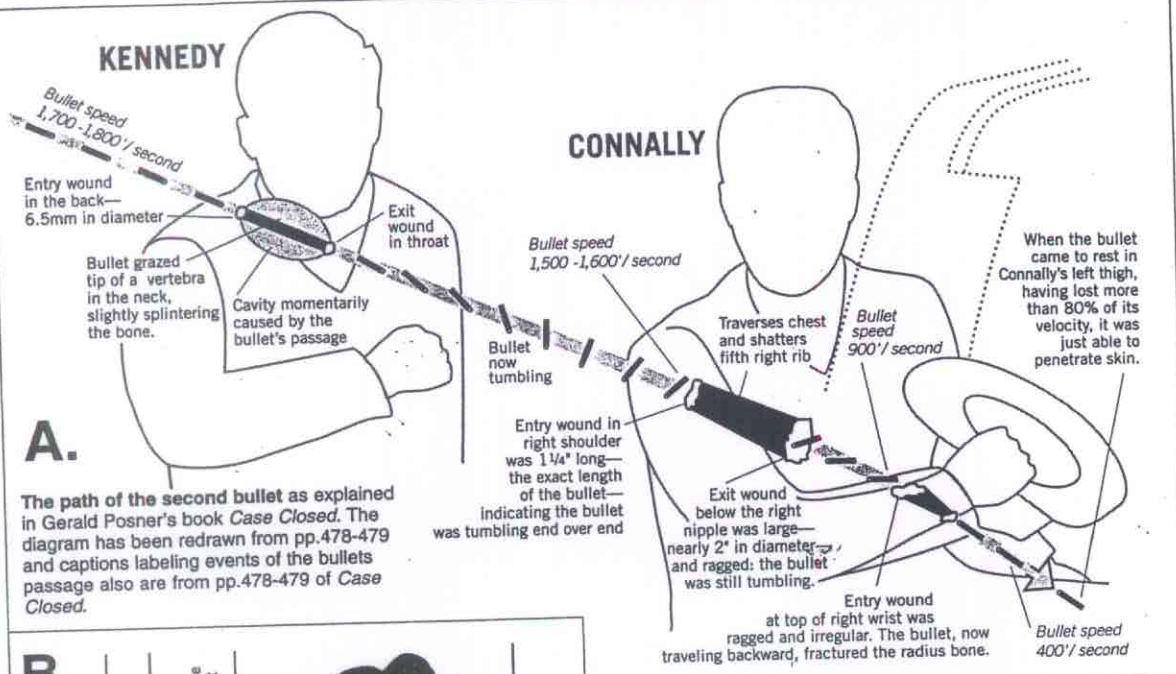
Complicating the issue significantly were conflicting reports from the Governor himself, as well as his wife. At first, Connally thought he was hit by a separate shot, as did Mrs. Connally. But a careful frame-by-frame analysis of the Zapruder film revealed some important details. For example, in Frame 224, there is evidence that both men were hit. Given that they were only sitting two feet apart, and the bullet was traveling at almost 2000 feet per second, it stands to reason that they must both show signs of being hit at nearly or precisely the same moment.

The tell-tale evidence is that the governor's right lapel flips up in Frame 224, in the exact location where a bullet traversed his body. Furthermore, by Frame 226, the governor is rigid, and in Frames 227-229, there is a jiggling of his Stetson hat, which he was holding with his right hand (also hit by the bullet). In real time, Connally jiggled his hat in under one-tenth of a second, and his face reacted in pain in two-thirds of a second. Posner cites this as proof positive that both men were hit at the same time.

But this still did not conclusively prove that one bullet and one shot inflicted all this damage, for two bullets fired at the same time could conceivably have done the same thing. Once again, Posner presents evidence that just one bullet did the damage, as shown in a simulation by Dr. Robert Piziali, who oversaw the tests conducted by the Failure Analysis Association, a firm specializing in computer recreations for lawsuits. Piziali's investigation answered two important questions: did one bullet alone hit both men, and was this bullet fired from the Texas School Book Depository? Critic notwithstanding, Piziali showed in his recreation that the position of the men was such that the seemingly strange path of the bullet indeed was not only possible, but certain.



Side and bottom views of Warren Commission Exhibit 399—otherwise known as the "magic" or "pristine" bullet. From the side the bullet appears unaltered except for a small amount of lead that has been squeezed past the bottom edge of the copper jacket. The end-on view reveals the formerly round bullet is far from pristine.



Contrasting views of the wounding of Kennedy and Connally
Drawing B is the overhead view of Posner's scenario A. The bullet passes in a straight line through both men until it strikes Connally's fifth rib. Redrawn from Posner's *Case Closed*, p.479.

In drawing C the shot that wounds Kennedy misses Connally. Diagram redrawn, and captions taken from Robert J. Groden and Diane J. Allen's *The Killing of A President: Dealey Plaza Memorial Edition*. Robert Groden was a consultant for the Oliver Stone film *JFK* and writes and lectures extensively on the JFK assassination. The lavishly illustrated *The Killing of A President* and many other materials that present a case for an assassination conspiracy are available from: Robert J. Groden, P.O. Box 823497, Dallas Texas 75382.

I think we can all agree with the conspiracy advocates that it is impossible for bullets to make abrupt turns mid-flight. But some simple facts are usually overlooked along the way: the governor was not sitting in a "normal" seat in front of the President; he was on a "jump seat" located in the large area between the back and front seats. Furthermore, this was a parade, and both Kennedy and Connally were busy twisting from side to side, making eye contact with and waving to the crowd.

Posner also addressed the issue of whether the magic bullet was indeed pristine. Examination of the missile showed it to be in less-than-perfect condition, somewhat bent and flattened. It was not nearly as pristine as critics claim when they seek to ridicule the Commission's findings. Agreed, the bullet was not severely deformed, but this is because it was a jacketed military bullet which performed precisely as it was supposed to: if no major organs are struck, it is supposed to pass through the victim's body directly, without inflicting major bodily damage. Following the Geneva Convention of 1922, such metal jacketed bullets were mandated for war as a more "humane" method of combat.

But why did the Warren Commission have a test bullet that, when fired into a cadaver's wrist, showed extensive deformation? Because the Commission did not precisely recreate the shot. Rather than being the first thing hit by the bullet, the governor's wrist was the last thing hit. By then, the bullet had slowed considerably. If the bullet had only hit Connally's wrist, it likely would have appeared as the test bullet did. But this was not the case, as shown by the evidence.

The truth is, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to perfectly recreate the shooting situation for test shots. To have a test bullet

pass through one cadaver and then into another in the exact path followed by the real bullet would be a long-shot proposition indeed.

Rather, it is more expedient to accept the fortuitous route of this one bullet. While Oswald may not have targeted the governor, he accidentally managed to hit two heads of government with one single shot. That the bullet was in reasonably good shape following the ordeal is not the issue.

THE MAFIA, CIA, AND OTHER ROGUE ELEMENTS

The early 1960s were rife with various groups that had instilled fear in the hearts of Americans. The Mafia, which had been singled out by the president's younger brother Robert for scrutiny, has been implicated by Scheim (1988) and Davis (1989) as having both motive and method to rub out the President. North (1991) argues for a J. Edgar Hoover role in the assassination. Lane (1991) and Weberman and Canfield (1975) propose that the CIA was involved, as does Morrow (1992) in his tell-all confessional account. Summers (1980) fingers the Cubans (although conspiracy devotees are divided as to whether they were pro-Castro or anti-Castro). If any group or individual had a hidden side to them, they were invariably accused of at least a passing involvement in the assassination.

A wealth of books have been published which try to implicate various parties. In most cases, the authors promote their personal agendas, so they indict the opposing party of their choice. One of the most comprehensive examinations of means, motives, and opportunities is provided by Marrs (1989), who calls on the carpet, one by one, the Russians, the Cubans (both pro- and anti-Castro), the Mafia, the CIA, the FBI, the military industrial complex, and "rednecks and oilmen." The only stone left unturned by Marrs is an alien involvement (but he did suggest in his 1997 *Alien Agenda* that other-worldly influences were at work in Roswell).

It is interesting to note all of the various individuals and groups that are fingered in conspiracy theories, for they demonstrate many of the fears prevalent in America, both then and now. There is one thing all had in common: they represent the darker side of life in the early 1960s. The Cuba component in the equation, for example, is understandable in this context. With the bungled Bay of Pigs operation and failed CIA attempts to kill Castro, it is not a particularly long stretch to conclude that Fidel was trying to exact revenge by killing the president. It was not beyond the realm of possibility that Castro could have had mercenaries in Dallas on that fateful day.

Neither was it impossible for anti-Castro zealots, angered at our failure at the Bay of Pigs, to have targeted Kennedy to get back at what they saw as his backing away from eliminating Castro for them. There were anti-Castro encampments in both Miami and New Orleans in the early-1960s, and, it is theorized, any of these groups could have made a road trip to Dallas.

And what about Khrushchev? Hadn't the U.S. violated Russia's territory with the Gary Powers U2 incident? The U.S. was embroiled

in a bad case of saber-rattling with the USSR, and we were falling behind in the space race. Fallout shelters were the family room of the 1950s, and the prospects of a nuclear war loomed large in the minds of many. In a Spy vs. Spy era, the idea that Khrushchev could have been behind a plot to kill the President seemed plausible to the Russophobic.

Then there are those who think that the CIA was behind the assassination, partly because of the Bay of Pigs affair, and partly because of the escalating conflict in southeast Asia. The CIA's Director, Allen Dulles, was not particularly happy about what happened (and did not happen) in Cuba. It is argued that the CIA, the most visible of U.S. intelligence agencies, was disturbed that the president was soft on our enemies, and was chomping at the bit to show our military prowess.

Related to this is the argument that the military industrial complex, a hodgepodge of large companies with lucrative defense contracts, was also anxious to see if their high-tech weaponry could really work. The embarrassment in Cuba was a thorn in their side, and some conspiracy advocates see this as the entrée for the defense industry to dispose of a leader who shied away from confrontation.

Other conspiracy theorists point to J. Edgar Hoover, the erstwhile Director of the FBI. Not one to be ruled or restrained, Hoover was not particularly pleased with the way Kennedy and Company were leading the country. Thus, we are left with suggestions that Hoover orchestrated the assassination.

The Mafia cannot be overlooked, either. The President's younger brother Robert had declared war on the Mafia. Why kill Jack when Robert was the aggressor? Conspiracy theorists love to recite an old mantra about getting rid of the dog that wags the tail—get rid of the dog, and the tail goes with it. Jack was the target, in order to silence Bobby. That the Mafia was often suspected of involvement is not surprising. During that time, the Mafia was particularly strong in many U.S. cities, including New Orleans and Dallas. Given allegations of the President's infidelities as well as his relations with people suspected of mob connections, the plot thickens. The name that pops up the most is Carlos Marcello, the New Orleans "Mafia Kingfish" (Davis 1989).

Finally, in an all-out exhaustive effort to implicate anyone with a passing interest in national politics, right-wing extremists, rednecks, oilmen, and the like are accused of silencing Kennedy. After all, conservatives had placed large critical ads in local newspapers concurrent with the President's visit to Dallas. Furthermore, Texas is and was a very conservative state, and Kennedy stood for many things that did not sit well with "proper" Texans.

In spite of all the well-worded treatises on whodunit, none can go further than basic innuendo. It is quite easy to suggest that a person or organization had means, motive, and opportunity. But that does not prove the complicity of anyone. Tossing around names of possible conspirators, but without the proof to back it up, is like saying that October's Hurricane Mitch was really a Contra plot to get

back at the Sandinistas.

As it stands, none of these individuals or organizations had much to gain by disposing of Kennedy. In fact, most had much to lose by doing so. Khrushchev could have started a nuclear war if he had been behind the plot. Castro would have invited a more serious military invasion if he were involved. The anti-Castroites would not have solved any of their problems by removing Kennedy. And if the CIA or FBI were involved, it would mean that we were at Civil War once again.

Perhaps it is in our nature to pin blame on other powers—particularly powers that are nefarious or fear-inspiring. But unless proof positive can be supplied, the conjectures are mere speculation, and entertaining at best.

OSWALD IN NEW ORLEANS

Another line of argument against the Oswald-only account is the strange trail he left before the assassination occurred, particularly in New Orleans. Oswald's behavior was so strange in The Big Easy that many conspiracy advocates use it as the focal point of their work. New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison (1988) was so convinced of Oswald's connections there that Garrison staged a post-mortem trial in 1967 to try to prove a conspiracy. And Hollywood's biggest conspiratorialist, Oliver Stone, used Garrison's case as the centerpiece of his pro-conspiracy JFK film.

There is no question that Oswald at one time lived in New Orleans. It is what he did, or might have done, in New Orleans that has conspiring minds churning out theories. Admittedly, Oswald led a strange life in New Orleans. Some of the various "eyewitness" accounts of his activities and associations are of dubious value (such as his alleged trip to Clinton, Louisiana, with two other men to participate in a voter registration drive). But with "shady" characters such as Guy Bannister, David Ferrie, and Clay Shaw walking the streets of New Orleans, as well as Carlos Marcello's henchmen ruling the underworld, it is easy to jump to conclusions. Never mind that Oswald made public appearances espousing his support of Castro's Cuba. Oswald single-handedly formed a local chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (albeit an imaginary one, not recognized by the national organization), and paid for and distributed leaflets promoting Fidel Castro (his new hero, following his disenchantment with Soviet socialism).

Garrison's discovery that Oswald was using an address, 544 Camp Street, that was "in the very heart of the local intelligence community (Garrison 1988)," propelled an investigation that did not end until Garrison was deflated in a courtroom. Marrs (1989) argues that it was at this address that the paths of Oswald, the FBI, the CIA, anti-Castro Cubans, and the Mafia all crossed (a strange intersection, indeed).

Bannister was a former FBI agent with ties to Naval Intelligence who had become a private investigator. One of his frequent



**"I urge
rationalists out
there to snap up
this book."**

—James Randi

**"...entertaining,
enlightening,
strongly recommend."**

—Martin Gardner

***Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* By Stuart Vyse**

Connecticut College Psychology Professor Stuart A. Vyse examines current behavioral research that suggests that everyday superstitions are the natural result of several well-understood psychological processes. Vyse entertainingly demonstrates how complex and paradoxical human behaviors can be understood through scientific investigation, and profiles personality traits associated with superstition and the role of superstitious beliefs in one's actions. Vyse acknowledges that superstition is a normal part of human culture, but suggests we learn to critically evaluate the source of our beliefs in order to develop alternative methods to coping with life's little, yet sometimes overwhelming, uncertainties. A significant contribution to the skeptical literature that should be in every skeptic's library.

Stuart Vyse on:

Chain letters:

"Now, if we very cautiously estimate that only two of 20 recipients would actually continue the chain, the number of participants in a year circulation is equal to 2^{45} or 35,184,372,088,832 (this is 35 million millions). Obviously, this number far exceeds the population of the planet (which is approximately 5.3 billion)."

Triskaidekaphobia (fear of the number 13):

"In France there is a company that provides emergency guests for dinner parties to make sure 13 people never sit at one table."

Superstition and Gender:

"A large number of studies have shown that women are more superstitious and have a greater belief in paranormal phenomena than men...Psychologists Jerome Tobacyk and Gary Milford found that college women had a greater belief in precognition...but men showed significantly greater belief in extraordinary life forms, such as Bigfoot and the Loch Ness monster."

Order on the colored tear card at the front of the magazine. *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* By Stuart Vyse. \$25.00 Hardback, 258 pages. Oxford University Press. No. 858HB.

captured the hearts of a citizenry suffering through the anxieties of the Cold War. While it is admirable that our country should grieve its fallen leader, the act of grieving alone does not prove a conspiracy existed.

The pro-conspiracy proposition suffers from a number of serious shortcomings. Foremost among them is that the burden of proof is on those who allege a conspiracy to name the individuals responsible for the conspiracy and to present their evidence for making that charge. The burden of proof is on the plaintiff as TV's Judge Wapner was wont to say. Instead, the C-buffs try to deflect attention away from their lack of proof onto problems they detect with the Warren Commission findings. But nitpicking through 23 volumes in search of errors to be able to discredit the lone assassin theory is no different from sifting through the 66 books of the Bible for historical or spiritual inconsistencies so as to vilify Christians. While there are errors in the Warren Commission report (and in the Bible, for that matter), this alone does not signify conspiracy or cover-up.

A second problem with the pro-conspiracy position is that none of the points they have made either singularly or collectively prove a conspiracy. They raise interesting questions, and then leave the reader to draw his own conclusions.

In addition, pro-conspiracy advocates have failed to produce any of the mythical accomplices. Lee Harvey Oswald was the only perpetrator caught, and in 35 years, no one else has been apprehended. It is easy to point fingers and imply that certain individuals or groups "coulda/woulda" been a part of such a conspiracy, but in the absence of such a person or persons, their position crumbles.

These would be conspirators are like the mythical "Raoul" concocted by James Earl Ray, in prison up until his death this year for the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. Ray, an uneducated con-man with loads of jail experience even before the murder, dreamed up this figure as his co-conspirator. Even the King family fell for Ray's story, and contends that Ray was at most only partially guilty for their patriarch's death. Posner (1998) handily debunks this "conspiracy" in his recent book on what is rapidly becoming the second-

most popular conspiracy theory in the U.S.

Another serious blow to the pro-conspiracy devotees is that there is division in the camp. About the only thing they can agree on is that they do not agree with the Warren Commission. After that, everyone goes their separate ways with the disparate targets and agendas. Scheim (1988) thinks the Mafia did it. Blakey and Billings (1981) contend that the CIA was in on it. Zirbel (1991) promotes his "Texas Connection" hypothesis that Vice President Lyndon Johnson was somehow involved (and had the hubris to pull off the crime in his own state!). And Garrison (1988), his theories championed in film by Oliver Stone, felt that criminal elements in his own New Orleans were responsible.

Making things even worse is the seemingly annual confession in another book or sizzling tabloid tell-all by someone who claims to either have been in Dealey Plaza that fateful day and can finger the other person(s) involved, or who claims to have been Jack Ruby's business associate (see Oliver 1994). Menninger (1992) goes so far as to say that a Secret Service agent accidentally fired the third shot, the one that actually killed Kennedy. Murder has even been elevated to scientific status in *Assassination Science* (Fetzer 1998), and Russell (1992), in an agonizingly long tome, spins a tale of a Soviet plot to use an American agent named Nagell to kill Oswald in order to prevent the Kennedy assassination. Aside from attempting to cash in on what is arguably one of America's most lucrative cottage industries, these tomes and treatises do nothing to further the cause of the pro-conspiracists, but are typically published just in time to mark another anniversary of the President's death with the same predictability of daffodils in Spring and candy at Halloween.

While disagreement between the followers does not itself destroy the pro-conspiracy position (if it did, most religions would be down the drain, too), it is the collection of these inherent weaknesses that makes their allegations untenable. Their method has been to systematically chip away at the Warren Commission, one brick at a time. Yet the core conclusion of Warren Commission report still stands—Oswald did it alone. □

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visitors was Ferrie, who was a fervent anti-Communist (and a quite memorable person, given his colorful hairpiece). Both Bannister and Ferrie did work for anti-Castro groups and Marcello's attorney. Conspiracy advocates frequently cite the testimony of Delphine Roberts, Bannister's former secretary. Roberts testified that Oswald had visited Bannister's office several times. As Posner (1993) showed, though, Roberts' testimony was of questionable value. Roberts' daughter, with the same name and who worked in the same building on Camp Street, said that Oswald kept his pro-Cuba pamphlets in an office at that address, and that he came there frequently and knew Bannister.

Posner dismisses Oswald's connections to 544 Camp Street as merely a false address used by Oswald (he likely walked past the building many times, and could have chosen that address from among many), or an effort by Oswald to besmirch the name of a fervent anti-Castro group that had a legitimate office at that address one year prior. Furthermore, as Posner points out, it is unlikely that Oswald could have afforded the rent on Camp Street.

Did Oswald know Ferrie? Some pro-conspiracy writers say that Oswald knew Ferrie in 1955, when Oswald was in the Civil Air Patrol. Garrison and others allege that Ferrie initiated Oswald into the CIA. The only problem with these hypotheses is that Ferrie had been relieved of his duties with the CAP for several years in the mid-1950s, and did not resume working in that capacity until 1958 (Posner 1993).

Oswald's supposed trip to Clinton, LA, is even more far-fetched. "Witnesses" placed him there in the company of Ferrie and Clay Shaw, a New Orleans businessman. This being Garrison's turf, he hunted far and wide for persons who could place Oswald in the company of these questionable characters. The event in Clinton was characteristic of the changing social milieu: blacks were being encouraged to register to vote, and the voter drive in Clinton had brought out numerous blacks to register, and many whites to make sure that blacks weren't being encouraged too much. Garrison's six witnesses reported seeing the unusual spectacle of a white man standing in line with blacks. That this white man arrived in Clinton in an expensive car with two other white companions makes the appearance even more intriguing.

Garrison's witnesses, however, were discredited by Posner, who showed that Garrison's team had to coax and coach the witnesses extensively to get their stories straight. But there were other inconsistencies with the eyewitness accounts, such as the timing of the incident (it could not have been in October, when Oswald no longer lived in New Orleans). Numerous internal contradictions render the Clinton story a probable falsehood.

The fact that many people swore they saw Oswald in a variety of locations and in the company of a number of shady characters after they had seen Oswald in the news following the assassination is not at all surprising. It is akin to the difference between recall and recognition in advertising research. Of the two, recall is certainly the most

powerful indicator of an ad's ability to maintain top-of-mind prominence. Recall tests are open-ended questions, with no cues for the respondent. Recognition, however, only requires respondents to declare if they remember seeing or hearing a particular advertisement. In order to avoid looking stupid and inattentive, people are likely to overstate what they think they saw or heard. With television broadcasting Oswald's likeness into the living rooms of millions of Americans, it is therefore not surprising that many people swore they saw Oswald in a variety of potentially compromising and indicting acts. His face indelibly etched on the minds of an emotionally upset public, it is to be expected that Oswald sightings came from all corners.

But given the chance encounters that we have with hundreds of people daily, it is unlikely that anyone could remember a stranger they saw today, much less months or years prior. Even if a person engaged in particularly memorable behaviors, it is doubtful that "witnesses" would be able to recall more than very general information.

In other words, unless there is a specific reason to focus on the physical features of a person (like someone robbing a bank, or a physical attacker), we are not likely to recall many specific details of our day. For example, we are exposed daily to hundreds and even thousands of advertising stimuli, yet it is unlikely that we could accurately name even five that we encountered in the last 24 hours. Oswald sightings would have been much easier (and more reliable) in the 1990s, when camcorders, TV crews, and public observation cameras became commonplace. But that was not the case in 1963, when a small percentage of people (like Zapruder) had the means to document events on film.

Of one thing we are certain, though: Oswald did pass out pro-Castro leaflets in New Orleans, and Oswald was arrested for disturbing the peace in a confrontation with anti-Castro activists. There is photographic proof of this, as well as the police record. But as for Oswald's other alleged New Orleans connections and activities, we can only conclude that they probably did not happen. Without definitive evidence, the Oswald-Bannister-Ferrie triad is more wishful thinking than reality.

THE MANY FACETS OF LEE HARVEY OSWALD

Yet another wrinkle in the Oswald case is his use of aliases, as well as speculation that he (or a "second" Oswald) made carefully-staged public appearances in Louisiana, Texas, and even Mexico City. More questions surround his double defection between the U.S. and Russia in the 1950s.

The Mannlicher-Carcano bolt-action rifle that Oswald used to kill Kennedy was purchased from a mail-order firm. Oswald would likely never have caused such a stir if he had simply used his real name. Instead, he used "A. Hidell," unwittingly helping pro-conspiracy theorists. Furthermore, he had ordered *Fair Play for Cuba* liter-

ature in New Orleans using the name Lee Osborne, but stamped these documents with his A. J. Hidell alias (Posner 1993).

If anyone involved in the assassination warrants a close investigation, it is Oswald himself. Here is a man who left behind a confusing trail: a disruptive childhood, a military career that took him to some decidedly sensitive places (e.g., Atsugi, Japan, the base for the U2), disenchantment with capitalism, defection to the USSR, disenchantment with Soviet socialism, re-defection to the U.S., and public support of Castro's Cuba. If ever there were a person of questionable character, it was Oswald.

Was Oswald an agent for either the U.S. or the USSR (or both)? While it may be possible, it is doubtful. Oswald had proven himself in years past to be unstable, not exactly the right trait for a spy. He lacked the raw intelligence and discretion necessary for such a role, and seemingly left an intentional trail of evidence behind that led straight to him.

If anything, Oswald was a disgruntled idealist. Dissatisfied with capitalism and its inherent social and economic inequities, he left for the USSR. There, he met his wife, Marina, but did not find the utopia he sought. Political drifter that he was, he returned to his homeland, not so much because he embraced its ideologies, but more likely because he had no place better to go.

Back in the U.S., he took up Castro's cause. But he was hard to take seriously, for here was an American, an Anglo at that, publicly promoting the policies of a perceived despot. It is no wonder that he attracted attention in New Orleans when he was handing out leaflets.

Conspiracy theorists love to bring up the back yard photographs taken by Oswald's wife. There, in his Oak Cliff neighborhood of Dallas, Oswald posed in the bright sunlight holding the Mannlicher-Carcano and various leftist newsletters. Critics contend that the photos were clever fakes, meant to indict Oswald. They argue that Oswald's face was photographically superimposed on another photo.

If JFK had been killed in 1998, this would have been a very believable proposition. With photo retouching software such as Photoshop widely available, it would have taken only a few mouse clicks to put Oswald's face on another person's body. But JFK was killed in 1963. While it was technically feasible for someone with darkroom and retouching experience to compile a photographic collage, analysis of the photos does not support this. As Posner points out, the grains in the photo are consistent throughout, proving that there had been no juxtaposition of faces and bodies. In reality, the photos show a person with a twisted mentality, bent on proving something.

Oswald sightings in Dallas and other parts of Texas are about as common as are his "sightings" in Louisiana. Once his face was broadcast, it seemed that everyone had seen Oswald...test-driving a car, practicing at a shooting range, in the company of Cubans...even appearing at a U.S. embassy in Mexico City. While it

is likely that Oswald did get around the Dallas area, he had a job and tried to lead some semblance of a life. These reported sightings are probably just colorful legends.

What is strange is that Oswald left the damning evidence behind of his backyard poses, yet tried to cover his tracks with aliases in other instances. If anything, this illustrates his instability. At one moment, he tries to cover his trail by purchasing his tracts with an assumed name (and addresses for his pro-Cuba committee chapter), but is stupid enough to get arrested for disturbing the peace while on the same cause. Furthermore, while he used an alias to buy the Mannlicher-Carcano, he then posed with it, and was behind in the sniper's nest, complete with fingerprints. This consistency further attests to Oswald's questionable mental state.

If anything can be concluded about Oswald, it is that he was indeed a lone nut, and most probably the assassin of President Kennedy. Commission, Posner, and other authors (Belin 1988, 1993) have concluded he was.

CONCLUSIONS

There are many other areas of inquiry that could have been explored for this analysis. Certainly the autopsy of President Kennedy was much to be desired, and left numerous unanswered questions. Many book chapters have been penned alleging botched autopsy, faked autopsy (see Livingstone 1992, for a thorough discussion of the alleged forgery of autopsy photos and X-rays). Cyril Wecht, in his book on pathology and crime, still contends that the Kennedy case is one of the worst cases of abuse of medical science that has ever existed.

As Posner recently said on the *Today Show*, the Kennedy assassination was partly to blame for this situation, because they didn't want the president's illness to become known. But a botched autopsy was not a conspiracy make. Nor do any of the other countless inconsistencies, or fantastic concoctions imagined by conspiracy theorists with conspiratorial tendencies.

If anything, the conspiracy crowd has sought to complicate a situation which is really quite simple—almost too simple to be taken at face value. Judging by the number of conspiracy theories surrounding numerous domestic tragedies of late, it seems it has become an ingrained part of our culture to need to believe that unseen powers are orchestrating the tragedies we see reported on television. Oklahoma City...Waco...the World Trade Center...TWA Flight 800...Lockerbie...Martin Luther King, Jr....the list goes on. And one more: Kurt Cobain (of Nirvana angst and acclaim) did not commit suicide...he was killed!

The JFK case, however, remains the Rosetta Stone of conspiracy theories. A president who inspired widespread admiration was snatched prematurely from a celebrity-worshiping American public. The Camelot lifestyle of the young and attractive first couple had