Conspiracy Interpretations of the Assassination of President Kennedy: International and Domestic

Alfred Goldberg

SECURITY STUDIES PROJECT

University of California
Los Angeles
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The RAND Corporation

Security Studies Paper Number 16
University of California, Los Angeles
1968
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Security Studies Project
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FOREWORD

The common penchant for attributing conspiracy designs to all sorts of untoward events on both the international and domestic scenes is powerfully represented by the aftermath of the assassination of President Kennedy. Dr. Alfred Goldberg, who has enjoyed the exceptional advantage of serving as the official historian of the Warren Commission, analyzes this penchant with respect to that shocking occurrence. The attributions of conspiracy were, at least in the beginning, as prominent in the international sphere as in the domestic.

Dr. Goldberg is presently a senior staff member of The RAND Corporation and was previously head of one of the historical divisions of the U.S. Air Force. This paper is based on two seminars which he gave for the Security Studies Project at UCLA.

I should like to thank the Ford Foundation for the support which made possible both the seminars and this publication.

Los Angeles
October, 1968

Bernard Brodie, Director
Security Studies Project
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PART I.
THE INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS

Although political assassination has been linked with conspiracy in the minds of men from the earliest days of organized society, assassination has rarely been a consequence of conspiracy in the United States. But the chain of events connected with the assassination of President Kennedy excited enduring suspicion and speculation about a possible conspiracy, even more so abroad than in the United States.

Great historical events such as the assassination of President Kennedy need the balance and understanding that can be gained from the broader perspective of the past if we are to retain a sense of proportion about them. Throughout history political conspiracy has been defined as a secret combination of persons for the purpose of changing the form or leadership of government by violence and other unconstitutional means. It is the instrumentality by which most assassinations and most coups d’états and revolutions are brought about. Assassination, frequently the initial overt act of a political conspiracy, involves the killing of a politically prominent personage.

Political conspiracy and assassination came into the affairs of men with the emergence of political authority, when power began to be vested in an individual, and the removal of that individual came to be seen as the quickest and simplest way to effect change. The motive might be personal, dynastic, or factional, intending the replacement in power of an individual, family, or party by another. Political murders have been a phenomenon of repressive absolutist governments and have therefore been commonplace throughout recorded history.

To our certain knowledge today, they have also been present in other types of government, including our own.

Political conspiracies and assassinations have generally fallen into three main categories:

1. Assassination for ideological reasons. Men have often considered political murder to be a duty and justified it by ideological arguments—religious or political. During the wars of religion in Europe in the
sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, more than one head of state fell to
the dagger or the gun of a religious zealot. In Czarist Russia, the rising
revolutionary forces, inspired by a variety of ideologies, took a steady
toll of Czars, prime ministers, and other notables for several decades
before the Revolution of 1917. Elsewhere in Europe, in a brief period
of six years--1894-1900--anarchists assassinated the President of France,
the Emperor of Austria, the King of Italy, and the Premier of Spain. A
year later, in 1901, a self-described anarchist shot President McKinley.

2. Assassination for purposes of political gain or change. These have
generally been inspired by domestic conspiracies, but there have been
instances of foreign-inspired assassinations. During the Renaissance,
when the revival of pagan ethics brought a revival of murder as an instru-
ment of state policy, the Borgias and the Medicis made a fine art of it.
The religious wars that followed further elevated political assassination
to a prime duty and sovereigns employed professional assassins to kill
other sovereigns or national leaders.

In the twentieth century only a few political assassinations have been
linked in some way to foreign countries. The murder of Chancellor
Dollfuss of Austria in 1934 occurred during an Austrian Nazi putsch that
was generally believed to have been inspired by Germany. The most
fateful of all assassinations during the century--the one that led to a
breakdown of the international order and a great war--of Crown Prince
Franz Ferdinand of Austria at Sarajevo in 1914, was linked by Austria-
Hungary, through Serbian terrorist groups, to the Serbian Government.
But these were the exceptions.

Most of the political assassinations and attempts in this century were
domestically inspired and carried out for internal political reasons. In
this category may be placed the attempt on Hitler in 1944, the attempts
against De Gaulle, the assassinations of head of state in Iraq in 1958 and
1963, the Nigerian assassinations of the past few years, and the killing
of Diem in South Vietnam in 1963. Most of these were connected with
coups d'etats or revolutions.

3. Assassination as revenge for real or fancied wrongs suffered at
the hands of society. This is generally the work of a lone individual
who is likely to be unbalanced. It is politically aimless, for change in
leadership that follows is not the purpose of the act, which is an end in
itself. Almost all successful and unsuccessful attempts on American
presidents fall into this category. The murder in 1965 of Verwoerd,
the South African Premier, by Tsefindas, is also in this category.

The most important question about the assassination of President
Kennedy still agitating at least part of the American public is whether
he was the victim of a conspiracy. The enduring curiosity and speculation about Kennedy's assassination is, in part, reaction to a great tragedy that had personal meaning for people. But even more, it is sustained by the mystery that is now forever a part of the event because of the murder of the alleged assassin—Lee Harvey Oswald. It is this mystery that has bred the conspiracy hypotheses, and although no conspiracy has been uncovered, doubts and suspicions linger on, since it is impossible to prove a negative conclusion beyond any doubt. The question of conspiracy, therefore, is unresolved in the sense indicated above and will probably remain so in the absence of new and incontrovertible evidence.

Although almost all of the speculation and theorizing about conspiracy in recent years has focused on domestic plots, in the days immediately following the assassination on November 22, 1963, the leaders of the U.S. Government were chiefly concerned about the possibility of an international conspiracy and its potential effects on the nation and the international community. Assassination of American Presidents have never been accompanied by attempted coups d'état or any other kinds of political or social upheaval; nevertheless, the possibility of conspiracy can never be disregarded until enough time has elapsed to reveal the pattern of events in the broad political environment. Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the President's assassination, there was apprehension within the government about the possibility of some kind of conspiracy, particularly a foreign one. The reactions and behavior of involved government officials during these four days—November 22 through November 25—provides a dramatic and revealing psychological background for consideration of the possibilities and implications of international conspiracy.

The possibility of a conspiracy in which the assassination of the President might be only the opening event naturally occurred to members of the Presidential party in Dallas, to other members of the government elsewhere, and to much of the public during the hours immediately following the shooting in Dallas. The reaction of the leaders of the government reveals not only shock and uncertainty, but fear of the unknown—of things yet to come. Immediately after the arrival of the dying President and much of his entourage at Parkland Hospital, the President's military aide, General Clifton, called the National Military Command Center in Washington to find out if there was any foreign intelligence that might be related to the assassination. Minutes after the President's death, which occurred about 1:00 p.m., the assistant press secretary, Malcolm Kilduff, asked Lyndon Johnson for permission to make a public statement concerning Kennedy's death. According to Kilduff, Johnson said: "No. Wait. We don't know whether it's a Communist conspiracy or not. I'd better get out of here and to the plane. Are they prepared to get me out of here?"
The head of Johnson's Secret Service Detail, Rufus Youngblood, felt that it was necessary to get out of Dallas, that "we don't know the scope of this thing. We should get away from here immediately." When Johnson demurred and said he wanted permission from a member of Kennedy's staff (this was only one of the oddities of the day), Youngblood said, "We don't know what type of conspiracy this is, or who else is marked. The only place we can be sure you are safe is Washington." In the unmarked car that took Johnson to the airport shortly after, Youngblood had the President crouch down below the window level. When they got to the plane, Johnson and Youngblood ran up the steps and Johnson ordered the shades drawn. Other extraordinary precautions were taken on the plane and at the airport.

On the flight back to Washington, General Clifton telephoned McGeorge Bundy, the Assistant for National Security Affairs, at the White House and asked if an international plot was emerging. Bundy replied cryptically and guardedly that the Pentagon was taking its own steps. Johnson's concern about the international aspects was reflected in his request to Clifton to arrange to have Rush, McNamara, and Bundy meet him at Andrews Air Force Base when the plane landed. At one point, Johnson requested that the Director of the CIA, John McCone, be prepared to brief him after his arrival in Washington. It seems clear that the idea of an international conspiracy against the United States entered Johnson's mind and lingered there probably for several days.

On the trip back to Washington the Presidential plane followed a zigzag course while the Air Force monitors listened for reports of "unidentified, unfriendly" planes in the southeastern part of the country. Air Force bases along the plane's route were on the alert, ready to send fighters up to protect the Presidential plane if necessary.

In Washington, the State and Defense Departments reacted quickly to the news from Dallas. Secretary of Defense McNamara, on hearing the news of the assassination, conferred immediately with General Taylor and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They sent a flash warning to all American forces around the world, placing them on alert. Taylor issued a special warning to all troops in the Washington area. Additional Strategic Air Command bombers were ordered into the air. Washington officials seemed to be waiting for word of a wider plot. Thus, the reflex by government officials responsible for national security was to take precautionary measures to guard against a coup d'etat from within and attack from without.

A half hour after the President's death, the Undersecretary of State, George Ball, telephoned John McCone and told him to get the Watch Committee on the job. McCone had already done so. The Committee
is a special intelligence group; during the entire weekend it examined foreign sources of information for indications of international links to the assassination. When Oswald's name was first given to the public as a possible suspect, George Ball ordered a check of State Department files to see if there was any information on Oswald. There was, of course, a great deal. After Oswald's dossier had been examined by the top State Department leadership, there was a discussion of the possibilities of war if the Soviet Union was found to be implicated in the assassination. Llewellyn Thompson, a former ambassador to the Soviet Union, told Ball that the Soviets didn't work that way— they might kill defectors, but not heads of states. Averell Harriman supported Thompson's view. Another State Department official, U. Alexis Johnson, felt that a strong public reaction against Oswald's link with Marxism could do great harm to the detente with the Soviet Union.

On receiving news of the shooting of the President, the plane carrying Secretary Rusk and five other cabinet members to Japan turned around over the Pacific and headed back to Hawaii. From Hawaii, Rusk sent instructions to the State Department to take international soundings, which it was already doing. To his colleagues he wondered "who has his finger on the nuclear button." On the flight back to Washington, Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon voiced the fear that the American people might seek retribution from the Soviet Union and/or Cuba. The possibility of a coup to overthrow the government did not seem to occur to most of the cabinet officers on the plane. But Rusk did turn over in his mind the question whether some foreign government might be involved, and he resolved that the question must be answered.

By the time the President's plane arrived at Andrews Air Force Base early in the evening, most fears about a possible coup against the government had probably been dispelled. More than four hours had elapsed since the assassination, and there had been no further events that appeared to be remotely related to it. And conspiracies and coups normally rely on speed and surprise to attain their ends. On the helicopter from the air base to the White House, McNamara told Johnson of the disposition of U.S. military forces and their readiness. Ball reported to Johnson how foreign governments were reacting to news of the assassination.

The day after the assassination, Saturday, November 23, Johnson began gathering the reins of government into his hands, making apparent to the country the safe and orderly transfer of power. A major and delicate problem was when to appear before Congress for an address that would serve to reassure the nation and the world about the transition. Sargent Shriver considered it important that this be done soon because it seemed to him that Africa, Asia, and Latin America would assume
that "whoever had killed President Kennedy would now be President." It was important to dispel this notion—but how? As we know, the notion was not entirely dispelled, and it has had some currency in this country also. In a conversation with Theodore Sorensen on the same day—Saturday—Johnson asked about the "possibility of a foreign government being involved in this." Sorensen asked if there was any evidence, but Johnson did not have any.

The gradual abatement on Saturday of suspicions about an international plot or a possible coup d'état was brutally reversed on Sunday by news of the murder of Oswald at the hands of Jack Ruby. There was renewed feeling among members of the Government and many other people that there might after all have been a conspiracy. Maxwell Taylor felt that there might be suspicion that the killing of Oswald had been done in order to suppress something. Douglas Dillon speculated aloud about who was behind the two murders, and some members of the Secret Service thought of the possibility of a plot. Llewellyn Thompson saw Oswald's murder as a diplomatic catastrophe.

The Chief of the Secret Service, James Rowley, fearful that Oswald's murder might be part of a wider plot, sought to persuade President Johnson not to follow on foot the gun carriage bearing the body of President Kennedy from the White House to the Cathedral, where the funeral ceremonies would be held. Johnson rejected Rowley's advice. During Sunday and Monday numerous threats and warnings were received by the police, the Secret Service, and the FBI. They were directed not only against Johnson, but at Earl Warren, Robert Kennedy, and some of the foreign leaders who had come to attend the funeral, particularly De Gaulle and Mikoyan. In spite of these threats the foreign heads of state and other representatives present for the funeral insisted on walking in the procession behind the gun carriage on Monday. The security precautions were extraordinarily heavy because some of the warnings were taken seriously.

The pall of the occasion was deepened by Oswald's murder and the renewed apprehension of some kind of plot. On the way to Arlington Cemetery from the Cathedral, Truman and Eisenhower, who were sharing a car, speculated briefly over whether the assassination had been the work of a conspiratorial group and decided that it hadn't.

Thus, in the early days after the assassination, leading officials of the U.S. Government gave serious thought to the possibility of involvement of a foreign power in the death of the President. From the beginning, attention fixed on the Soviet Union and Cuba as the governments most likely to have been involved in the assassination in some way or other. There were inevitably rumors and allegations about the possibility of

Could any such suspicions have had more support in any way? This is a commentary on the validity of the cited opinions and "authority" behind them.
other countries or international organizations having some connection with the assassination, but there was no substantial evidence to link any countries other than the Soviet Union and Cuba to Oswald.

From the beginning, the State Department considered it highly improbable that any foreign country could have been behind the assassination. Nevertheless, it moved quickly to find out if there was any possibility of an international conspiracy. After twenty-four hours of intensive investigation and soundings around the world, the State Department in a public statement on Saturday, November 23, notified the country and the world that there was no evidence of a conspiracy involving a foreign country. To some, the statement seemed premature, but its chief purpose was undoubtedly to allay fears and passions among the American public and to reassure the rest of the world. Of course, it was not the final word on the subject, but it represented the best judgment of the State Department and it was issued with both domestic and international political considerations in mind. At the same time, a Department representative asked newsmen to play down speculation about the possibility that Oswald might be an agent of Castro or the Kremlin.

On the previous night, only hours after the President's death, the State Department had also taken an action that reflected its concern that international aspects should be damped down. It strongly supported the Justice Department in steps to have a reference to an international conspiracy deleted from the indictment being prepared against Oswald in Dallas. Actually, no such charge appeared in the indictment, but the rumor had travelled far, probably as the result of loose talk by members of the Office of the District Attorney in Dallas.

The murder of Oswald on November 24 revived apprehensions of conspiracy and made imperative a thorough investigation of the circumstances of both murders. When President Johnson persuaded Chief Justice Warren on November 29 to become Chairman of a commission to investigate the assassination, he stressed the possible international repercussions. A version of the meeting between the two quotes Warren as follows: "... the President told me how serious the situation was. He said that there had been wild rumors, and that there was the international situation to think of. He said he had just talked to Dean Rusk, who was concerned, and he also mentioned the head of the Atomic Energy Commission, who had told him how many would be killed in an atomic war. The only way to dispel these rumors, he said, was to have an independent and responsible commission, and that there was no one to head it except the highest judicial officer in the country. I told him how I felt [Warren didn't want to do it]. He said that if the public became aroused against Castro and Khrushchev there might be war." Subordinating his personal wishes,
Warren finally agreed to head the commission.

What might explain the President's heavy stress on the international aspects of the assassination? Whether his remarks were a kind of political hyperbole which he considered normal and appropriate for purposes of persuasion or whether they represented genuine alarm about the possible effects of rumors is difficult to tell. It was possible for reasonable people to have some suspicions about foreign plots, but the President's concern about international repercussions was perhaps overstated after a period of a week during which no evidence of such plots had emerged and the Government had publicly acknowledged the lack of any evidence of foreign complicity.

The Warren Commission did devote a great deal of its time and effort to finding out whether the assassination was in some manner directed or encouraged from abroad. In its Report, issued in September 1964, the Commission stated that it had "investigated each rumor and allegation linking Oswald with a conspiracy" which had come to its attention, regardless of source. In addition to information and documents supplied by the Soviet and Cuban governments, the Commission received important data from U.S. Government agencies that permitted it to authenticate and judge the most significant documents and assurances received from the Soviets and Cubans. The Commission also had Oswald's known writings or other possessions, which might have been used for code and other espionage purposes, examined by the FBI and the National Security Agency to determine if they were so used.

An enormous range of people touched in some way by Oswald—directly or indirectly—was investigated, including many who seemed to have past or present foreign connections of any kind. These included members of the so-called Russian colony in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and the Cubans Oswald had encountered when he lived in New Orleans. The foreign links touched other countries also—Mexico, Japan, Germany, Switzerland, Finland—but most of these links were tenuous at best and yielded nothing significant. Rigorous and painstaking investigation of Oswald's finances and way of life after his return from the Soviet Union in 1962 revealed the high improbability that he was receiving funds from unaccounted-for sources. This would tend to discount the possibility that he was a paid agent for any organization.

Although fears and rumors of foreign involvement in the assassination diminished greatly while the Commission was conducting its investigation, individual Commissioners did insist at times on following up avenues of investigation that appeared to have potential conspiratorial implications—international or domestic. These investigations yielded nothing new or
significant. The Commission's final verdict on foreign conspiracy was in accord with the testimony before it of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who stated that he had "seen no evidence that . . . [the Soviet Union] had an interest in the removal of President Kennedy." Rusk did not see how it could be to the interest of the Soviets to make any such effort. The President of the United States and the Chairman of the Soviet Union necessarily have "somewhat special responsibility for the peace of the world . . . without exaggeration, one could almost say the existence of the Western Hemisphere in this nuclear age." Rusk believed that it would have been "an act of rashness and madness for Soviet leaders to undertake such an action, because everything would have been put in jeopardy or at stake in connection with such an act." As for Cuba, "it would be even greater madness for Castro or his government to be involved in any such enterprise than almost anyone else, because literally the issue of war and peace would mean the issue of the existence of his regime and perhaps of his country."

The Commission's conclusion that it had found no evidence that either Oswald or Jack Ruby was part of any conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy was generally anticipated, especially by the critics of the Commission who were already at work, but there was visible relief in many parts of the world that the United States Government, through the Commission, had officially rejected foreign conspiracy as part of the assassination.

In the Soviet Union, the immediate reaction to the assassination on November 22 was one of shock, concern, disbelief, and regret. Soviet news and comment in all communications media were dominated to an unusual extent by the assassination and its aftermath. Much of the comment was in a context of the international effects of the assassination. Kennedy was hailed as an "outstanding statesman" and praised for his efforts to reach an East-West détente.

From the beginning, Moscow insisted that Kennedy had been killed by some right-wing element. This Moscow reaction was immediate—it was voiced even before Oswald's capture was announced. Oswald's murder by Ruby lent fresh weight to the notion of a conspiracy, and Moscow informed the country and the world that there was every reason to believe that Kennedy was assassinated by a large organization, not by a single individual as certain American authorities were trying to make out. The theme of a right-wing conspiracy became a continuing refrain in Soviet newspapers, radio, and television reporting, and has persisted to the present day. It was clear to the Soviets that there was a "criminal conspiracy by the decadent forces of reaction"; like the German Nazis at the time of the Reichstag Fire in 1933, these provocateurs were seeking
to accuse Communists of the murder of the President. This was absurd because only enemies of peace and of the easing of international tension would profit from Kennedy's death.

The Soviets, perhaps no less than the United States, were fearful at the time of the assassination that an anti-Communist reaction in the United States might severely damage U.S.-Soviet relations and endanger the peace of the world. There was much speculation about whether Johnson would continue Kennedy's foreign policies. There was firm rejection that Oswald could have been a Communist or a Marxist, or a pro-Cuban. The Russian people had not yet been told by June 1964 that Oswald had once resided in the Soviet Union for more than two years.

There is evidence that within the Soviet Government there was great concern about repercussions in the United States to the news that Oswald had been a defector for a time and had lived in the Soviet Union. It is likely that there was a very careful and highly urgent examination and analysis by the Soviet Government of all information in its possession pertaining to Oswald, probably not many hours after the State Department in this country began its inquiry.

The Soviets also cooperated to an unprecedented extent with the United States in the investigation of the assassination. By November 30, the Soviet Embassy in Washington had made available to the State Department its consular files on Oswald. Copies of documents relating to Oswald's residence in the Soviet Union were also made available later at the request of the Warren Commission.

According to the New York Times, when the Warren Commission Report was published in September 1964, "American officials found clear signs of relief among Soviet officials that Moscow was not being blamed for the assassination." After a Russian language version of the Report became available, the Soviet Government ordered the U.S. Embassy in Moscow to halt distribution because it purportedly slandered the Russian people. It did not specify what was objectionable.

Subsequently, the Russians mounted a full scale campaign against the Report and by innuendo sought to implicate President Johnson in the assassination of his predecessor. This theme has been fitted into the overall scheme of Soviet internal and foreign propaganda attacks depicting the United States as a nation riven by racism, injustice, lawlessness, and rightwing reaction from the lowest to the highest levels of society. The more recent assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy have lent additional weight to some of this propaganda.

The Cuban reaction to the assassination was one of shock and near-panic. A French newspaperman, Jean Daniel, has written that he was with Premier
Fidel Castro when he learned of the death of the President. Castro showed shock; his reaction was to repeat three times: "Everything is changed." Then he said, "The United States occupies such a position in the world that the death of the President of this country affects millions of people in all corners of the globe." The following night, in a two hour speech on Havana radio and television, he told Cubans that "the news of the assassination of the President of the United States is serious and bad news." It was bad news because "the event itself may have very negative repercussions with the interests of our country" and "has all of the prospects of leading from a bad situation to a worse situation." It would be worse for Cuba because the reactionary group in the United States, which would be the only one to benefit from President Kennedy's death, would like to follow a warlike and aggressive policy against Cuba. Castro said that the assassin must have been a right-wing fanatic. Why had the U.S. State Department issued a statement that there was no evidence of a conspiracy? Because of the fear that an anti-Soviet and anti-Cuban campaign would be dangerous and unsettling. The peace of the world was menaced by this conspiracy of the right and Cuba must "demand to know what is behind this in our own interest."

The pattern established by Castro in this speech provided the basis for subsequent Cuban interpretation of the assassination. The fear that the United States might seek to take advantage of the situation by undertaking some kind of reprisal against Cuba subsided gradually. According to Rusk, the United States was aware that there was "very considerable concern in Cuba as to whether they would be held responsible and what the effect of that might be on their own position and their own safety."

Like the Russians, the Cuban Government cooperated with the U.S. Government by making available copies of documents pertaining to Oswald, specifically those dealing with Oswald's visit to the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City.

The efforts by the Russians and the Cubans to dissociate themselves from Oswald and to discredit and ridicule characterization of Oswald as a Communist, Marxist, or Castroite, were obviously born of uneasiness and of fear of guilt by remote association. The complement of this reaction was to fasten on the United States the image of an unstable, divided nation in which conspiracy and assassination by reactionary forces could endanger the whole international order. But the concern for the international effects was undoubtedly genuine—with the Cubans it could literally have been a matter of survival.
Any examination of conspiracy hypotheses—either domestic or international—must focus on three fundamental questions.

1. What were the possible sources of conspiracy—who might have been behind the assassination?

2. What could have been the motivation of possible conspiracies?

3. What manifestations of conspiracy other than the assassination itself were there? And here it is necessary to consider non-events as well as events themselves, because the absence of something significant or something that we might reasonably and logically expect to be present becomes an event in itself.

The U.S. Government gave serious consideration only to the Soviet Union and Cuba as possible instigators of a conspiracy against President Kennedy. Given the psychological conditioning of years of cold wars, the recency of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the links to Oswald, it was perhaps inevitable that of all the nations of the world, suspicion should fall most heavily on these two.

If we turn to the question of motivation, we find that the possibilities range over a wide field of human and national behavior, but few have even a faint tinge of credibility to them. The only ones deserving of analysis are (1) a revenge motive, and (2) a national interest motive—some political gain.

It is difficult to accept revenge as a credible motive of the Soviets. It is utterly inconsistent with the pattern of Soviet behavior over the years, and it is impossible to conceive of any act by President Kennedy that could have led to feeling against his person strong enough to transcend traditional Soviet caution. Great powers cannot afford to be moved by such a motivation in the age of nuclear weapons and missiles. Injection of such a personal motive into relations between nuclear powers would be irrational, irresponsible, self-defeating, and therefore incredible.

Accordingly, there remains only the national interest motivation—some hope or plan to gain significant political advantage from the assassination—the gain would have to be very important if the high risks involved were to be acceptable. But there is no evidence of any gains or any effort by the Soviets to make gains or even to bring about minimal changes in the international environment. Indeed, the evidence is to the contrary—not only declarations of concern about the effects of the assassination on the world environment, but the complete absence of acts or declarations calculated to advance Soviet interests. It is the absence of any manifestations of political events, internal or international, that
negates the possibility of a Soviet conspiracy. It is the non-event that is the important element in judging the Soviets. And certainly, simply bringing about a change in U.S. leadership through a constitutional succession, as occurred, could hardly be regarded as a credible motive for the Soviets. It could serve no purpose of theirs to replace Kennedy with Johnson.

The only gain that did accrue to the Soviets was the propaganda value they derived from depicting the United States as an unstable, divided nation headed for serious internal troubles. Soviet propaganda sought to foster among the NATO nations and others in the world the surmise that the United States might not be the powerful and stable guardian of their interests it appeared to be; that it was a crumbling force in world affairs, and that in time of trouble they might not be able to count on the United States coming to their aid. To the extent that America’s allies were influenced by these ideas, the Soviets may have benefited. That they would have accepted the risks inherent in such a deed as the assassination of Kennedy simply to score a dubious and inconclusive propaganda victory seems too improbable to be considered seriously.

When we turn to Cuba, it is possible that the weighting of the two motivations should be reversed. The national interest motivation may be discarded quickly because it is utterly improbable that there could have been any political gain accruing to Cuba from the assassination. The contrary, as Castro pointed out, was much more likely. The more likely, but still highly improbable motive would be revenge—presumably for the Bay of Pigs, for the missile crisis, for alleged attempts on Castro, and for U.S. antagonism toward Cuba. But once again, although Castro’s volatility lent the revenge theory some credibility in the minds of some people, the risks to Cuba were so great that even emotional Cubans would have had no trouble evaluating the consequences. It is logical to reject this motivation also.

There occurred none of the manifestations that normally accompany a political conspiracy—not a single significant or distinguishable overt action or statement within the United States or elsewhere in the world that could be related to the assassination itself, except the murder of Oswald. It is the non-events, including especially the absence of change in the basic direction of U.S. domestic and international policies in the years since the assassination, which provide the most powerful argument against a foreign plot.

What observations about the international environment may be drawn from the experience of the Kennedy assassination and the broader context examined above? There are several that are worthy of further consideration.
First, the assassination of the leaders of either of the great nuclear powers is a major international event of crisis proportions. For a time, the Kennedy assassination was an international crisis, in which much of the world felt involved. In many parts of the world, fear of the possible consequences for the world order went even to the point of concern over whether war or peace might indeed be at issue.

Second, the international implications of such an assassination in either the United States or the Soviet Union may be far greater than the domestic ones. The domestic environment in both countries in times of such a crisis is more susceptible to control and manipulation than is the international environment. The great uncertainties could be international rather than domestic, as they were in the first days after the Kennedy assassination.

Third, assassination of the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union is not likely to disrupt or drastically change national policy in either country. Both countries possess a high order of political stability. The American constitutional succession is a tried and proven procedure of government, and the Soviets have developed what appears to be a successful method of changing top leadership legitimately. It must be conceded that an assassination in the Soviet Union resulting from a genuine power struggle between contending groups could result in important policy changes.

Fourth, rather than a disruptive effect, assassination of the national leader, certainly in the United States, is likely to have an integrative effect. This is what happened in the United States after the Kennedy assassination, and it lasted to an extraordinary degree for more than a year. A foreign-inspired assassination, had it become known as such to the public, would have had an even more unifying effect, perhaps comparable to the effect that Pearl Harbor had on the nation. It seems possible that the assassination of a top Russian leader, if it were not the result of an internal power struggle, would also have an integrative effect.

Fifth, the ambiguities of the international order were revealed in the ambivalent thoughts and actions of the leaders of the countries most involved, especially the United States. Even while American officials entertained seriously the thought of an international plot, waited anxiously for further developments, and took military precautions, they sought at the same time to minimize and
and dispel the idea of such a plot, partly because they found it difficult to believe in it and partly because they wanted to avoid an abrupt and dramatic rise in world tension. The Kennedy assassination thus dramatically exposed some of the uncertainties of international behavior and the difficulties in perceiving and evaluating the possible purposes and actions of others.

Sixth, an accidental crisis such as the Kennedy assassination can be dangerous for a world order which is under great tension and in which suspicion, distrust, and violent forms of competition exist side by side with efforts at greater detente and understanding. Such an ambiguous world is especially susceptible to misunderstanding and fears in time of crisis. The world may account itself fortunate that the ultimate international repercussions from the assassination were not as serious as at first feared.

The significance of the international aspects of President Kennedy's assassination has generally been overlooked and neglected because of the intense concentration in recent years on the domestic conspiracy aspects. U.S. leaders were justified in their concern about the possibility of a foreign-inspired plot and the international effects of the assassination regardless of whether there was a plot or not. It was fortunate that the assassination occurred during a period of relative calm in United States-Soviet affairs. Had it occurred a year earlier, during the Cuban missile crisis of October, 1962, the consequences for the world would have been far more fateful--plot or no plot. In November, 1963, there was time to investigate, to deliberate, and to determine that no foreign nation was responsible for the assassination of President Kennedy. This was a constructive contribution to the maintenance of stability and trust in the international order.
PART II.

THE DOMESTIC ASPECTS

Most of the speculation about the assassination of President Kennedy in recent years has centered about the possibility of a domestic conspiracy. But according to some observers, a substantial number of people, especially in the South, still believe that the assassination was the result of an international communist plot. This group has not been so vocal as others and its opinion is reflected only in the polls, where it is lumped with the believers in domestic conspiracy.

The believers in an international communist conspiracy also hold to an alternate theory—a domestic leftist conspiracy that may or may not have been inspired from abroad. Based on Oswald's self-professed Marxist leaning, his defection to the Soviet Union, and some of his other activities, this view has received minimal public attention in recent years because there is little to support it, although one could probably make some kind of a case by selective use of documents and testimony amassed by the Warren Commission. It has received little attention also because the main thrust of speculation and theorizing has been in the opposite direction—to show that there was a right-wing conspiracy of some kind behind Kennedy's death.

The proponents of the right-wing conspiracy notion have been industrious and articulate. Many of them started immediately after the assassination and their output was already considerable before the Report of the Warren Commission appeared in September 1964. Since then they have produced numerous books, articles, and movies, appeared on television and over radio, and lectured widely.

The conspiracy theorists (some call them demonologists) have raised many pertinent questions about the circumstances of the assassination, the testimony of witnesses, and the nature and meaning of physical evidence. They have obviously influenced the public, of which only a small minority has read the Warren Commission Report, and a yet smaller percentage, all or part of the twenty-six volumes of testimony and documents. Most people have acquired the bulk of their notions and attitudes
towards the assassination from limited exposure to the press and television. Many of the most convinced believers and propagators of the conspiracy theory—whether it be right, left, or foreign-inspired—belong to this category who are content, indeed determined, to be guided by instinct and a very little knowledge. But then the craving for sensationalism on the part of the public is overwhelming and it is always easier to throw stones at a target than to defend it. Conspiracies are like the elves—because there is no evidence, you have to believe in them to know they are there.

To understand the nature and origins of the domestic conspiracy theories it is necessary to examine the context in which they emerged—the climate of opinion that nurtured them (and to which they, in turn, contributed), and the circumstances that made a whole generation receptive to these hypothetical schemes. No single explanation can be given for the rise and currency of conspiracy theories; there is a complex interaction of attitudes, prejudices, beliefs, and predispositions. It seems to me that the following are some of the most important of these factors.

First, the Kennedy assassination was not only one of the great historical events of the century, but its emotional impact affected people directly and personally. We can all still remember the great tide of grief, loss, shame, and anger that engulfed the country. It made a deep and lasting impression and created an abiding interest, curiosity and fascination about the assassination and almost anything connected with it. The feeling was further deepened by the murder of Oswald, which precluded the establishment of his guilt or innocence by regular judicial procedure. Thus, there has persisted an aura of mystery and of the unknown that cannot be completely and finally dispelled.

The Warren Commission Report did not prove beyond any doubt that there was no conspiracy and that Oswald was the lone assassin: a negative conclusion cannot be proved. The Commission believed that it proved Oswald’s guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, which is the basic requirement in law, but in the absence of a court trial this has not been enough for many people. There are some loose ends, inconsistencies, and contradictions in the Report that trouble people and provide some basis for conspiracy hypotheses. Such loose ends and contradictions are present in most legal cases involving homicide—indeed are regarded as being in the nature of things in such cases. But this particular homicide was not an ordinary one, and many people have found it difficult or impossible to accept a residue of uncertainty and of inexplicable fact, and thus have struck a balance on the side of suspicion of conspiracy.
Second, and closely related to this feeling of unease and suspicion and interacting with it, is the reluctance and disinclination of many people to accept the idea that a lone assassin could so capriciously end the life of a President. Many people feel threatened by the notion that mentally disturbed and ill persons are at large among us and might strike at any time without warning or justification. Psychologically, the presumption of a conspiracy is less threatening and bizarre because it has an element of purposeful motivation and a specificity of objective that is absent from the aimless killing. This resort to a conspiratorial diagnosis, according to one study, "would seem to be particularly functional in the case of the Kennedy assassination because most people do not make easy use of the concept of mental illness in explaining behavior--especially if the actor displays self-control and appears to be cognitively rational."

Since the Kennedy assassination, the American public may have become better informed on the subject. There have been many aimless killings by mentally ill people acting alone, of which the mass murders have received the most attention. Of these, the one at the University of Texas, where one deranged young man took the lives of seventeen people, is perhaps the best remembered.

A third reason for the tendency to be suspicious of less than absolute certainty is that conspiracy and worry about it have been part of American life since the beginning of our history, especially in this century. The rise of revolutionary ideologies and the reaction against them brought about fears of conspiracy from both the right and the left. Fear of revolutionary plots led to the repression of the radical left in this country through prosecution in the courts and deportation, especially in the years of the A. Mitchell Palmer crusade immediately after World War I. The anti-communist crusade continued more or less intensely until its culmination in the McCarthy period of the 1950s--an era of suspicion and distrust induced by fear of internal conspiracy supported by foreign enemies. The damage done to American institutions, including the U.S. Government, by this right-wing campaign may have been more substantial and lasting than we may yet realize.

Since the days of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s suspicions of right-wing conspiracies have also existed in the United States--and these were accelerated by the rise of new and very radical right-wing groups in the 1930s. Fears of right-wing conspiracies were revived in different forms in the 1960s and provided some of the basis for the suspicions about the Kennedy assassination.

The tendency of this country to think in terms of conspiracies goes, of course, beyond the purely political, although few conspiracies can
be completely divorced from politics. Business, labor, and criminal conspiracies have been frequent in this century. Indeed, one of the theories held is that the Mafia was probably responsible for the Kennedy assassination, and some people are satisfied that both the motive and the resolution existed. Thus there is a feeling among many people in the country that there are and have been dark forces in American life which secretly exercise great power and are capable of using violence to attain their objectives. Out on the fringe are those who start with a paranoid or apocalyptic view of the world. They are present on both the left and the right.

A fourth inspiration of some of the demonologists and their supporters comes from their strong political bias. Extremists normally see intrigues in the course of events and espouse conspiratorial views. Some members of the left were undoubtedly stung and upset by the revelation of Oswald’s background and the suggestion that he may have been involved in a leftist conspiracy—either foreign or domestic. Their immediate reaction to news of the assassination had been that it had been the work of a right-wing extremist. They refused to accept the premise of an assassin or a conspiracy from the left and sought an alternative explanation.

Among those who set out to find a right-wing conspiracy, there were undoubtedly some who, as Dwight McDonald put it, "had a large lefthanded political axe to grind." It is normal for such people to direct suspicion against individuals or groups who represent values and political positions that they dislike or oppose. Part of their problem was what to do about Oswald—find him an unfortunate innocent, a dupe, or a concealed right-winger. There was no unanimity on this among the demonologists and all of these explanations of Oswald’s role appear in the conspiracy literature.

A fifth and powerful reinforcement of conspiracy ideas has come out of the crisis of confidence in government and society that has become so rampant and indiscriminate in a few short years. The extraordinary outpouring of denunciation, the voicing of so much distrust and suspicion of many of the institutions of our society, and of the society as a whole, has resulted in the aggravated alienation of individuals and groups from authority and government. This hostility has chiefly centered on the federal government; once the great hope of many of the disillusioned, the more strongly they originally held to the hope for reform and change in society by the federal government, the more bitter their expression of hostility. In the main, leftist and liberal groups have been thus affected—or, more appropriately, disaffected. The more immediate and public catalysts for this powerful tide of dissent are well known to all of us—Vietnam, racism, the crisis of the cities, the credibility gap,
and even the President himself. In some of its effects this assault on the Government is comparable to the McCarthy attacks of the early 1950s.

The assassination of President Kennedy has become one of the symbols of this crisis of confidence in government. Theories about the assassination are often cases of reading the present and the future back into the past, and of visiting the sins of the present upon the past. Present day attitudes towards the great issues of our time shape and color our view of the past and tend to lead to revisionism and re-interpretation of past events which gave rise to these issues in the first place. Though their effects are still of great moment today and for tomorrow, some of the great historical events—World Wars I and II, and the Cold War, for instance—are sufficiently remote or so vast that they can be viewed without the distortion of great passion or emotion by most people. But an event such as the Kennedy assassination is so recent and of such enduring emotional impact on this generation that contemplation and reexamination of it are inevitably accompanied by powerful currents of personal and political passion. Consequently, there are reassessments of the work of the Commission and its Report that tell us that the Commission acted to "reassure the nation and protect the national interest" rather than to tell the truth about the assassination. The country has been sensitive to allegations of a government credibility gap since 1965; attacks on the Warren Commission and its Report have further aggravated suspicion and distrust of government.

There are undoubtedly other reasons—psychological, economic, political—why the conspiracy theories have had a great deal of currency in this country and abroad. The circumstances which created the climate for conspiracy theories to emerge, to flourish, and even run wild, and which shaped their nature and direction, also predetermined the attempted resolutions of the issues and dilemmas that are inherent in such theories.

The conspiracy theories are varied, ingenious, imaginative, and often fantastic. Only a few of them are deserving of serious consideration and analysis, and these only because of the widespread belief that there was some sort of a conspiracy. Many, probably most, theories are to be rejected because they do not fit any sensible set of facts or because events that would be an integral part of such conspiracies did not occur. Thus, we may rule out conspiracies for revolutionary or ideological reasons because there followed none of the events that normally accompany such plots—most conspicuously, public declarations by the conspiratorial groups involved. Conspiracies for the purpose of accomplishing a coup d'état or some form of government takeover may also be ruled out. Of course, it is not impossible for conspirators to get cold feet and
abandon the rest of their planned action after such an event, but this is most unlikely in this particular context. It is incredible because any attempt to take over the U.S. Government would surely involve connivance by many people in high places.

The types of conspiracy just mentioned are historically the most usual ones, but they have been absent from American experience. Unable to muster either evidence or logic to support these typical conspiratorial hypotheses, conspiracy-seekers as a last resort have settled on two theories based on the Latinism cui bonum—who benefits?

According to this view, there is a formidable array of potential beneficiaries from President Kennedy’s death. This category includes white racists, Texas oil millionaires, other assorted right-wing elements. Most of these groups had opposition in common to the domestic and foreign policies of the Kennedy administration. Racist and reactionary at home, they would also scrap the détente with the Soviet Union, the test ban treaty, and arms control and disarmament ideas, and get on with the anti-communist crusade at home and abroad—a crusade that lost a great deal of its steam both at home and abroad except for our venture in Vietnam. It is unavailing to call attention to the fact that these groups were and are opposed to the Johnson Administration—except for Vietnam. For some demonologists this one exception is sufficiently overriding to prove the case. There could be other potential benefits that might accrue to some of these groups from a change in Presidents. According to this view, Texas oil millionaires might feel more comfortable about their oil depletion tax allowance with fellow-Texan Johnson as President. And, of course, the demonologists can see sheer hatred alone as a sufficiently compelling motive for such groups.

Hatred and a revenge motive are distinguished as characteristics of two other groups that have been suspect as possible assassination conspirators. One is an anti-Castro ring of Cubans seeking revenge for Kennedy’s betrayal of them or their compatriots in the Bay of Pigs incident and for his failure to act against Cuba and thus restore them to their rightful place in their country. According to this theory, in addition to revenge they might possibly hope for some change in U.S. policy that would further their aims in Cuba. This would constitute their profit from the event. Much of the thrust of the Garrison investigation in New Orleans for a time seemed to be going in the direction of an anti-Castro group. Lately, the focus of attack appears to be the whole government of the United States.

The other element motivated by revenge is purported to be a group of present or former CIA people who supposedly had been nursing a deep grudge against Kennedy since the Bay of Pigs incident, because of
alleged slights and slanderous remarks about the agency, and because of his foreign policy approach. Here, too, the conspiracy theorists detect the possibility of expectation of beneficial policy changes as possible additional motivation. As yet, other powerful elements in the government that disagreed with President Kennedy or were put down by him in some way—such as the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for instance—have not been labelled as conspiratorial suspects. But with all of the groups mentioned above, the dominant motivation would have been revenge.

There is still one other beneficiary of the assassination—the chief one by conspiratorial standards of judgment—the heir to the throne, Lyndon B. Johnson. The finger of suspicion is also pointed at him—sometimes by hint or innuendo—as by Richard Popkin in "The Second Oswald" who speaks of "rumors that I have often heard" that the President's assassination may have been organized by his successor. Sometimes there are more direct accusations, as by Garrison. This has also been a part of the Russian and Cuban explanation of the assassination, and has gained credence in other, non-Communist parts of the world. According to this theory, Lyndon Johnson's motivation was the classical one of succeeding to leadership. It is even possible for some to find that Johnson may have been motivated by revenge for past humiliations at the hand of the Kennedys.

If these hypotheses are the most plausible of the conspiracy hypotheses advanced—and they seem to be the ones that emerged farthest into the light of day—then there is no need to give consideration to the others. From the standpoint of the theorists, a great advantage of the revenge and the accelerated succession hypotheses is that they do not require explanation of the absence of other actions in connection with the assassination—actions that would have had to occur to make other conspiracy theories at all plausible. If revenge was the motive, no other actions need have taken place and the assassination itself was the sole objective. To the extent that there might have coexisted a motivation to bring about a change in domestic and international policies, this would be hoped for as a result of the change in Presidents. Thus, it can be demonstrated by this reasoning that motives existed among potentially conspiratorial groups, and that there was no need for any action by the conspirators beyond the assassination itself.

Having established hypothetically the who and why of conspiracy and explained the absence of any other events normally a part of most assassination conspiracies, it is incumbent on the theorists to present evidence—demonstrable facts—to support their cases. In the five years since the assassination no new evidence has been uncovered. Accordingly, we are left with the evidence that we do have, and it is this that we must use in
further analysis of conspiracy.

Any conspiracy theory must dispose of Oswald and his role in the assassination in some way or other. Just as he was necessarily and inevitably the beginning point for the Warren Commission's investigation, so he is central to any conspiracy hypothesis and must be accounted for.

Among those who reviewed the Warren Commission Report and the evidence, Dwight MacDonald gave the most logical and penetrating analysis of Oswald's role in the assassination. He postulated that if we accept the weight of evidence and informed legal opinion, we must conclude that Oswald shot both the President and Tippet. If we reject some or all of this evidence as faked, then it is necessary to assume two conspiracies: one for the assassination, and a second one to cover up the first by framing Oswald.

There are four possibilities regarding Oswald's role:
1. He did both killings alone and without accomplices.
2. He was innocent and mistakenly identified as the assassin.
3. He was innocent and framed by the real criminals or the police.
4. He was part of a conspiracy and may or may not have participated in the shooting.

For our present purposes, we may ignore number 1, that he was guilty and did it alone, since it rules out conspiracy.

There has been no consistent, reasoned argument that has been able to establish number 2, that Oswald was the victim of mistaken identification. The weight of logical deduction and evidence is that beyond a reasonable doubt Oswald shot both President Kennedy and Police Officer Tippet. This would rule out Oswald as an innocent victim of circumstances and lend no help to the conspiracy hypothesis. The physical and circumstantial evidence against Oswald is sufficiently powerful and convincing so that legal opinion is agreed that it would be more than adequate to convict him in a court of law.

If we believe number 3, that Oswald was innocent but framed, then we must assume faked evidence. Not all of the evidence could have been faked—there were too many non-investigatory people involved in providing evidence—and that which could not be faked—the weapons, documents, cartridges—is enough to link him to the two murders. This hard evidence is enough to eliminate number 3, that he was innocent but framed.

Since we are concerned with conspiracy, we must examine number 4—that he was a member of a conspiracy and may or may not have partici-
pated in the shooting. Among the demonologists there is division of opinion about whether he was innocent or a member of a conspiracy. There is a dilemma in believing that there was a conspiracy whether Oswald was a member or not. Either (1) police and government investigators knew about the conspiracy or came to know about it and covered it up or (2) they did not know about a conspiracy and, in spite of their best efforts, were unable to find any trace of one. The proposition that an investigation of this scope and intensity, probably the greatest in American history, would completely fail to turn up any evidence of a conspiracy if there had been one, does not seem realistic, although it is logically possible. Most of the conspiracy theorists do not accept this proposition because they do believe that the investigation could not have failed to find some evidence of a conspiracy, which, according to them, must have existed. Many of them believe that they have found traces of conspiracy or evidence of concealment or perversion of evidence in the materials printed by the Commission itself.

Accordingly, there persists among many conspiracy theorists and their supporters the belief that somewhere in the investigatory chain, ranging from the Dallas police to the Warren Commission, there is knowledge of conspiracy or of some evidence pointing thereto. Whether such knowledge, if encountered by some investigators, could have been concealed from the others is most doubtful. The ground was covered again and again, and what the Dallas Police might have known, the FBI would also have found out. It is doubtful that the FBI could have kept knowledge of this kind from the Warren Commission. The Commission staff did a great deal of probing and investigatory work on its own, especially in Dallas and with the police, so that it could not have been easily deceived.

If one postulates a coverup of a conspiracy by the government, then it very likely would have had to reach all the way from Dallas to the White House. And it would include not only the Chief Justice of the United States, but the then Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy, who had jurisdiction over the FBI, the chief investigatory agency supporting the Commission. The Justice Department also had representatives on the Commission staff who provided liaison with the Attorney General. There might be reasons of state why men like Kennedy and Warren might wish to cover up a conspiracy, but it is difficult to conceive of any. It is obvious on the face of it that a coverup would have to involve hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people with some degree of knowledge of a conspiracy or of something wrong. That the necessary discipline could be exercised in an open society such as ours to hold in line such a large number of people of different values and attitudes is too much to believe.
But over and above this, why should the government want to cover up a conspiracy by a right-wing group? Why would Earl Warren or Robert Kennedy or Lyndon Johnson seek to cover up for Texas oil millionaires, anti-Castro Cubans, racist groups, or even a dissident CIA group? Lord Devlin, the English jurist, asked, "Why should the possibility or the probability or even the certainty that there was a second unidentified man working with Oswald be supposed to shake Washington to its foundations or to require for its concealment the invention of a political truth?" Why indeed? Since there are no rational answers to these questions, it is necessary to take the next step and ask if there are any circumstances under which the government might seek to suppress knowledge of a domestic conspiracy. This leads us once more to Lyndon Johnson.

According to some demonologists, Johnson had by far the best motive, the most reason to cover up the assassination if guilty, and the power to cover it up or cause it to be covered up. If one can seriously entertain the notion that Johnson was directly responsible for Kennedy’s death, does it follow that he could have suppressed the evidence? For every person more than two involved in a conspiracy the chances of detection or betrayal probably rise at least geometrically. And the payoff from exposing such a conspiracy would be enormous, both financially and politically.

The alternative indictment of Johnson is that he encouraged or permitted Kennedy to visit Dallas even though he knew that the President might be vulnerable to assassination in a city notorious for its high political passions and record of violence. This is a kind of moral responsibility that some seek to fasten on Johnson, but it is not the kind of thing that needs covering up or that can be covered up.

There is no support for a hypothesis of domestic conspiracy to be derived from logic, past American experience, or hard evidence. The logical fallacies of such a theory are very great. Past American experience of Presidential assassination points to the opposite conclusion from a conspiracy. And still there is no physical evidence—no identification of other assassins or conspirators, no other known weapons, no other bullets or cartridge cases.

What then remains of conspiracy hypotheses if analysis of the broader context of the assassination—the who and why and related circumstances—reveals a very low probability of conspiracy? And if there is no new physical evidence related to the assassination, what then? It becomes necessary then for conspiracy theorists to return to the assassination itself and attempt to demonstrate that there must have been more than one assassin. It is not impossible that Oswald could have been the lone.
hatchetman for a conspiracy, but this would not serve the purposes of the theorists because they need to prove more than one assassin if they are to find a conspiracy. If there was more than one person firing, then the presumption of conspiracy is strong, if not absolute. Therefore the more serious conspiracy inquiries which focus on the assassination itself seek to establish the following propositions:

1. that, for a variety of reasons, Oswald could not have fired all of the shots that were aimed at Kennedy and Connally;
2. therefore, there must have been more than one assassin firing;
3. if there was more than one assassin, this establishes the basis for the existence of a conspiracy.

It is not possible to evaluate here in detail the evidence concerning the mechanics of the assassination. The major issues which have emerged center about:

1. the number of bullets fired and from where
2. the timing of the bullets
3. the reactions of Kennedy and Connally to the shots as revealed by films.

There is no physical evidence to indicate that more than three bullets were fired. The total of the fragments recovered added up to considerably less than two whole bullets. The likelihood of there having been three bullets is based on the cartridge cases found in the Depository building and on the testimony of witnesses. Other witnesses testified to hearing either fewer or more than three shots.

The chief basis for questioning the number of shots, the timing and direction of the bullets, and the reactions of the victims is found in the films of the assassination, especially the Zapruder film. Recent proponents of the two or more assassins theory claim that interpretations of the films (particularly of a superior copy of the Zapruder film) disprove the single bullet theory (that one of the shots hit both Kennedy and Connally) and the single assassin explanation and reveal that there must have been firing from more than one direction. While these interpretations are considered persuasive by some, they are by no means conclusive and remain simply possibilities.

The other basis for doubt and disbelief that Oswald could have performed the deed attributed to him in the Commission's Report is that he was not a competent enough rifleman and that he could not have fired the shots in the time available to him.
For many people, an evaluation of these elements adds up to a verdict of actuarial improbability, but improbable elements do happen. They are apparent in most murder cases; if considered separately and not in the whole context, they may seem impressive. Thus, if one looks at the totality of evidence linking Oswald with the assassination, the probability that he could have fired accurately and quickly enough to do the deed seems much greater. The known and highly probable circumstances--Oswald’s ownership of the rifle that was found, the bullet fragments and cartridges that had been fired from the rifle, Oswald’s presence in the building, Oswald’s palm print on the rifle--add weight to the probability that Oswald fired at Kennedy and that he fired with greater accuracy and speed than might have been expected.

If there are those who feel that they must suspend disbelief in order to accept the Commission’s finding that Oswald was the lone assassin, how much more disbelief must be suspended to accept the theory of two or more assassins? As we have seen, the who and why of a conspiracy to assassinate Kennedy do not represent a high order of probability. What circumstances must we accept if we are to believe that there was a conspiracy and that there was at least one rifleman in addition to Oswald? At a minimum, the following:

1. Selection of Oswald as a principal assassin by a conspiratorial group. One might well inquire how serious, dedicated, and organized they were if they had to rely on the unstable Oswald as a principal.

2. Reliance on Oswald’s cheap rifle ($19.95 with the scope--$12.45 without).

3. Selection of firing positions in addition to Oswald’s. Most theorists suggest that there was at least one more rifleman firing from the grassy knoll. Would this exposed position in the open have been selected? Why not put a man with a pistol on the sidewalk? Most assassinations have been from close up.

4. Synchronization of fire from two or more different positions—the assassins could not have seen each other—their angles of vision would have been different. How would they have coordinated their fire?

5. An order of accuracy in firing at an angle from the grassy knoll against a moving target that would probably have had to be greater than that required of Oswald firing from the Texas School Book Depository.
6. The absence of any physical evidence of firing from anywhere else. Could there have been someone else to help pick up the empty shells and help with the getaway from the grassy knoll?

7. The clear getaway of the second assassin without any eyewitnesses to identify him. Anyone firing from the knoll would surely have been even more conspicuous than Oswald and would have had less opportunity to get away unobserved.

8. A getaway by Oswald that was odd and bungling when compared with that of his fellow assassin or assassins. An organized conspiracy could surely have done better. An explanation for this by the conspiracy theorists is that Oswald was a fall guy.

9. A possible connection between Oswald and Ruby as members of a conspiracy. Many conspiracy theorists maintain this or hint at it, but there is no evidence to support these notions.

10. That Oswald and Ruby, if members of a conspiracy, had sufficiently powerful motivation to refrain from confessing to such a connection. If Oswald was indeed a fall guy—and the circumstances of his escape and capture would suggest that he might have been if he belonged to a conspiratorial group—why would he shield the other members of the conspiracy who had let him down? He had plenty of opportunities to talk. Ruby had several years and innumerable opportunities and even strong motivation to confess after he knew he was dying. Furthermore, he had a temperament for the dramatic and it is hard to believe he could have held back.

These are some of the issues and dilemmas that confront the architects of conspiracy theories. They can only be resolved by assumptions, since there is no physical evidence and no circumstantial evidence that is adequate to admit of much probability.

And so, we must finally come to the point where we ask whether there is a conspiratorial hypothesis—any single consistently reasonable theory—that is more probable than the findings and conclusions of the Commission's Report. Do the evidence of the assassination itself and the logic of the context make it more probable that there was a conspiracy and at least two assassins or that there was no conspiracy and only a lone assassin? It is the totality of the evidence and of the context that must be considered, recognizing that the individual elements are uneven in many ways—in terms of weight, significance, reliability, and probability. There are obviously elements of chance occurrence in the Commission's reconstruction of the assassination. But the perfect case is likely to be a fraudulent one. Had the Commission's purpose been to conceal the real truth and to
present only a political truth, it would have hardly presented the data and the documents which are not in accord with its basic findings and conclusions. But it not only presented them—it discussed and analyzed them.

Freud wrote that "it takes a high degree of sophistication to believe in chance; primitive fears are allayed more easily by a devil theory of politics." One must obviously accept the operation of a considerable element of chance if one accepts Oswald as the lone assassin. There were fortuitous and lucky (if one may put it that way) circumstances, and also unlucky ones that affected Oswald. Chance put him in a job in the Texas School Book Depository; his marksmanship on November 22, 1963 may well have been as good or better than he had ever done before; he managed to make his getaway from the Texas School Book Depository under lucky circumstances. On the other hand, he could not dispose of the rifle and the cartridge cases; he had the misfortune to encounter Police Officer Tippett; he was spotted ducking into the Texas Theater without paying; his death at the hands of Ruby was the result of the conjunction of a remarkable number of circumstances against which the odds must have been enormous. There were other circumstances also in which chance and contingency played an important part.

And what is the alternative to the Warren Commission's reconstruction of the assassination—this distressing, banal, ambiguous event that has all of the earmarks of real life which are familiar to all of us, but which we often refuse to recognize or accept as true of events of great import also? The alternative is some nebulous conspiracy hypothesis seeking some sanction of fact or reality that has thus far escaped it. The element of chance in this hypothesis is confined to Oswald. All of the elements of the event that have to be supplied by the imagination—the conspirators, the other assassin or assassins, the physical circumstances of the deed, the escape of the other assassins, the keeping of the secret—all of these are presented in one-dimensional terms. There is no allowance for the chance and ambiguity of real life. There is no evidence, there are no eyewitnesses, no one talked or betrayed the conspiracy. And yet with each additional assassin and conspirator the element of chance would have been all the greater—the loose ends, inconsistencies, and contradictions. But none has come to light. To accept the mountain of improbabilities inherent in these conspiracy hypotheses required a far greater suspension of logic and judgment than does the Warren Commission Report with its imperfections. Indeed, it is the presence of these real life imperfections which is one of the strongest arguments for the fundamental honesty and soundness of the Report.
Let there be no mistake about the ultimate target of most of the conspiracy theories. What is of the greatest importance is not that there may have been a conspiracy. It is whether the U.S. Government deliberately withheld information of a conspiracy from the American people. It is the United States Government—from the President and the Warren Commission on down through the investigating agencies into the lower reaches of the bureaucracy—which is the target of such theories. They hold that if there is not a clearly visible explanation of a conspiracy then there must be a deliberately concealed one. The country can survive conspiracies—even one that results in the death of a President, but can it survive the loss of faith and confidence in its government and its institutions? The Commission has been accused of giving the nation a political truth rather than the real truth, of seeking to reassure the nation by protecting it from the shock of learning that there had been a conspiracy to kill President Kennedy. If this were so, it would have been one of the great misjudgments of American history, for the damage to the national interest by concealing the truth of such an event would be far greater than any damage sustained by revealing the truth. The demonologists, without evidence and by playing on a receptive public in a time of trouble, have been successful in fomenting doubt and suspicion, thereby impairing trust in the Commission and the government. The government may be successful in keeping some secrets—and in our open society these must be precious few—but this is one secret that it would have been impossible to keep. If there was a conspiracy, the Warren Commission never found it out, nor did any other government agency. It is, of course, perfectly possible, even probable, that they never found a conspiracy because there was none. But this will not discourage others from continuing the search, for to many people suspicion and search are an end in themselves.