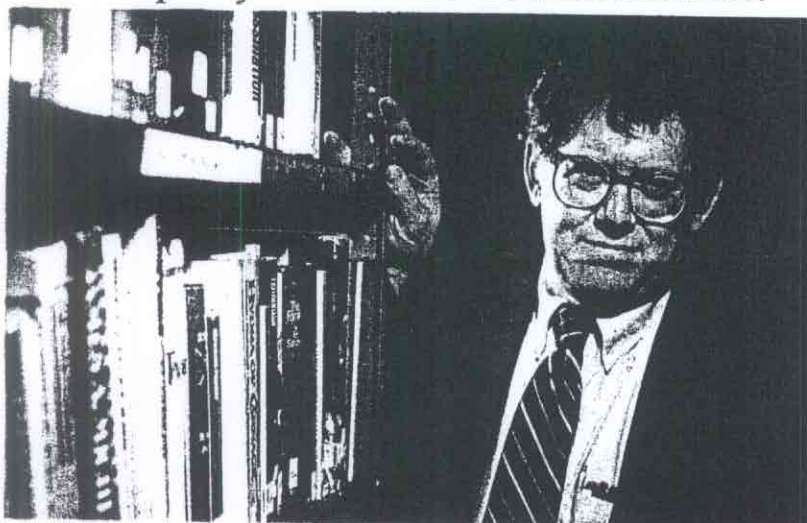


PORTRAIT

## A Conspiracy Theorist's Assassination Archives



James H. Lesar says that, while subscribing to no one theory about John F. Kennedy's assassination, he's been convinced since 1963 that there was a conspiracy.

By SCOTT JASCHIK

WASHINGTON  
Most scholars of John F. Kennedy do their research at the Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston or at the National Archives. But a small number—the "Oliver Stones" of academe—conduct research at an unusual library here: the Assassination Archives and Research Center.

The center houses documents, books, photographs, and films about political assassinations, ranging from the attempt in 1972 on the life of then-Presidential candidate George C. Wallace to the 1865 killing of Abraham Lincoln. (The latter is particularly appropriate, perhaps, since the center is just around the corner from Ford's Theater, the assassination scene.)

The bulk of the collection is material on the assassinations of President Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Among the highlights of the collection are more than 100,000 pages of Federal Bureau of Investigation files on President Kennedy's assassination; 50,000 pages of Los Angeles Police Department documents on the Robert F. Kennedy killing; and an index of more than 30,000 names of people linked to intelligence activities.

### Controversy Over a Movie

"We have it all in one place and we make it easy to get," says James H. Lesar, president of the center. Amid the controversy over the hit movie *JFK*, journalists and members of the public have been flooding the center with telephone calls, seeking to use the information.

The center is a non-profit organization founded by Mr. Lesar in 1984 as an outgrowth of the Committee to Investigate Assassinations, a group of researchers working to challenge the official explanations of President Kennedy's death. Mr. Lesar and other researchers wanted a central depository for material released by the government in response to requests or lawsuits under the Freedom of

rooms adjoining Mr. Lesar's law offices. He is the only staff member, and the center's \$24,000 budget, most of which goes to paying the rent, is provided by people who pay \$25 a year in dues or who make contributions.

### 'A Very Fundamental Event'

Most days, at least before *JFK*, the center receives from five to ten phone calls with research questions and two or three visitors for on-site research.

Mr. Lesar says he does not believe any one theory about President Kennedy's assassination, but he has been convinced since 1963 that there was a conspiracy. At the time, he was an undergraduate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where in September 1963 he organized that campus's first protest against the Vietnam War.

Asked why he has devoted so much attention to the Kennedy assassination, Mr. Lesar says: "It's a very fundamental event in American political and social history. And it's unresolved."

Since receiving his law degree in 1969, Mr. Lesar has devoted his legal career to helping others file lawsuits to retrieve government documents, a specialty he has used repeatedly on the center's behalf. The center is now in federal court trying to obtain hundreds of thousands of pages of classified documents on President Kennedy from the FBI and the Central Intelligence Agency.

### 7 Years to Get FBI Records

Because of his work, Mr. Lesar also helps researchers who are not studying assassinations, but are tangling with the FBI or other federal agencies over access to records. Jerry D. McKnight, a professor of history at Hood College, praises Mr. Lesar for seven years of work on his behalf in obtaining records from the FBI for a book Mr. McKnight is writing on the bureau's monitoring of Martin Luther

need somebody like Jim because the agencies volunteer nothing and will do everything possible to stonewall."

Scholars who use the center praise its collections. David R. Wrone, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, says the center is "invaluable." He is the author of a bibliography of materials on the Kennedy assassination and is writing a book on the Warren Commission, which investigated the tragedy.

Researchers who use the archives say they are frustrated that most academic historians do not share their interest in the Kennedy assassination. Says Mr. Wrone: "The academic world has shut its doors on the murder of John Kennedy. They think it's beneath them."

Herbert S. Parmet, a professor of history at Queensborough Community College and the Graduate School of the City University of New York, says that Mr. Wrone is correct. Mr. Parmet notes that his two-volume biography of President Kennedy pays little attention to the assassination.

### Doubt About Revelations

"Academics don't make much of conspiracy theories. They tend to be interested in the forces that move nations politically or socially," Mr. Parmet says. "My assumption is that the assassination probably had nothing to do with Kennedy's life or Administration."

Mr. Parmet, who has never used the Assassination Archives, says of the center: "If it can stimulate thinking, that's fine, but I doubt it will lead to any great revelations. The substance of that would come from files that are still classified."

Mr. Lesar says he agrees that researchers need to see documents that are still classified. But he says academic historians should stop using that as a reason to shun research on the assassination.

Says Mr. Lesar: "It's the traditional role of scholars to try to