

The Death of JFK: Conspiracy Roundup

CROSSFIRE

The Plot That Killed Kennedy

By Jim Marrs

Carroll & Graf, 595 pages, \$25.95

REVIEWED BY BILL WALLACE

Although more than 25 years have passed, to most Americans the assassination of President John F. Kennedy remains one of the most memorable and disturbing events of the 20th century. With the squeeze of a gunman's trigger, U.S. attitudes about politics, law and government were changed forever.

Given the incredible impact of the Kennedy murder — and the holes in the Warren Commission's conclusion that the president was killed by Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone — it is not surprising that books about the assassination have proliferated.

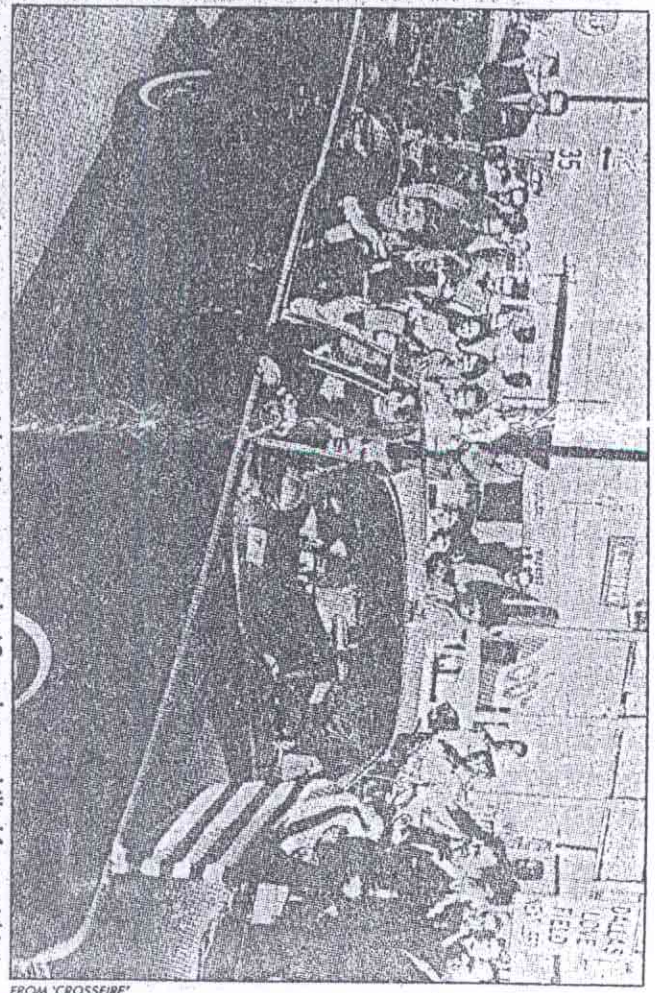
"Crossfire," Jim Marrs' compendium of assassination evidence and theory, is the most recent example and is being billed as the last word on Kennedy's death — at

least until the Warren Commission's sealed files in the National Archive are opened sometime in the next century.

In his effort to unify and synthesize the various schools of assassination thought, Marrs faced a difficult task. Exclusive of the Warren Commission's own 27-volume study, more than 100 books and countless articles have been written about the slaying, most of them disputing the commission's findings and marshaling evidence for one or another theory linking the assassination to foreign or domestic conspiracies.

Marrs' book differs from most of its predecessors in that it does not try to conclusively demonstrate a particular conspiracy theory. Instead, Marrs explains and details the evidence for all the major hypotheses, then amalgamates them into a sort of Unified Field Theory of assassination in which the CIA, the Mafia, anti-Castro Cubans, the military-industrial complex and the oil industry all participated to a greater or lesser degree in the murder of the 35th U.S. president.

Based on circumstantial evidence, Marrs even suggests that Lyndon B. Johnson may have played a key role in the plot, not-



FROM 'CROSSFIRE'

In his book on Kennedy's assassination, John Marrs concludes 'Camelot was killed from within'

most intriguing examples of arcana: the widely seen smoke puffs from the grassy knoll that may have marked the spot from which the fatal shots were fired, but which were discounted by the Warren Commission; the unidentified "tramps" from a nearby railroad yard who were captured and then inexplicably released by Dallas police (was one of them E. Howard Hunt, the Watergate burglar?); the deaf witness who never was able to tell his story to the FBI because he could not speak; and — most enigmatic of all — Lee Har-

sion that "Camelot was killed from within, by men whose fear and ambition overpowered their faith and loyalty to the Constitution." If this conclusion was startlingly original or supported by a substantial body of new evidence, "Crossfire" would be a welcome addition to assassination lore.

However, much of what Marrs has to say has been said better elsewhere. His book's sole virtue appears to be that it pulls much of this material together into a single package for the first time: its main

police, key witnesses and government officials, Marrs provides no index. As a result, he is forced to repeatedly reidentify important characters — sometimes several times in a few pages — further slowing the narrative flow.

Finally, he ends each section with more unnecessary repetition: a summary of the main points he made in the preceding pages. While this type of literary device may be useful in a textbook aimed at students who aren't very bright, it is somewhat insulting in a book

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them into a sort of unimpaired friend. Theory of assassination in which the CIA, the Mafia, anti-Castro Cubans, the military-industrial complex and the oil industry all participated to a greater or lesser degree in the murder of the 35th U.S. president.

Based on circumstantial evidence, Marrs even suggests that Lyndon B. Johnson may have played a key role in the plot, not to mention, for example, that after the assassination, Johnson had the Kennedy limousine destroyed before it could be thoroughly scrutinized by investigators probing Kennedy's death.

In these pages, the would-be assassination buff can find the

NIXON

Continued From Page 3

of six books and several articles on the subject and adviser to Presidents Reagan and Bush on dealing with the Soviets and the Chinese.

In Parment's view, Nixon was a man of his age, mirroring the fantasies and frustrations of the American electorate, especially the American middle class, those whom William Sumner eulogized in 1876 as the "forgotten men," and Nixon, almost 100 years later, termed the "silent majority."

Parment is doubtless correct in suggesting that Nixon's faults have been much exaggerated, making it difficult to understand either the man of his era with any degree of accuracy. Nevertheless, Parment's defense of Nixon is less than convincing, predicated on the ideas that "Nixon was less vicious than some have claimed in his campaigns against Jerry Voorhis and Helen Gahagan Douglas," and "Nixon was a force for moderation on the House Un-American Activities Committee." The point still remains that Nixon was an active member of a committee that most Americans now believe

the fatal shots were fired, but which were discounted by the Warren Commission; the unidentified "tramps" from a nearby railroad yard who were captured and then inexplicably released by Dallas police (was one of them E. Howard Hunt, the Watergate burglar?); the deaf witness who never was able to tell his story to the FBI because he could not speak; and — most enigmatic of all — Lee Harvey Oswald, the mysterious loner with ties to the CIA, the FBI and organized crime who claimed he was just a "patsy" in the Kennedy shooting.

Marrs uses bits and pieces of this officially ignored assassination evidence to press his conclu-

to have been un-American in the worst way.

Nor are Parment's encomiums of the Nixon foreign policy and his high regard for Nixon's recent writings persuasive. The Nixon foreign policy was driven primarily by desperation to get the United States out of Vietnam; hence, the overtures to China and the Soviet Union. And Nixon's books are remarkable chiefly for their banality and lack of strategic vision.

Recently, George Bush followed Nixon's recommendation that the United States reopen relations with China, a move that surprised and angered many, even in the Republican Party.

Still, the spate of Nixon biographies shows no signs of slowing down, although no new revelations are likely until biographers and historians gain full access to Nixon's presidential papers and tapes. When that happens, all can look forward to another round of reassessments, with no expletives deleted.

Daniel L. Wick teaches history and literature at the University of California at Davis.

this conclusion was startlingly original or supported by a substantial body of new evidence, "Crossfire" would be a welcome addition to assassination lore.

However, much of what Marrs has to say has been said better elsewhere. His book's sole virtue appears to be that it pulls much of this material together into a single package for the first time; its main defect is that the package is not very good.

Although Marrs has used extensive direct quotations and a breathless writing style in an effort to create a compelling narrative, his book is laced with clichés — "the ill-fated Bay of Pigs," police "combing" the railroad yard for evidence, "Kennedy felt his military advisers had led him down a primrose path" — and clogged with clumsy newspaper-style attribution instead of footnotes.

Worse yet, while the book contains the names of scores of spies,

FREEDOM

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convincingly.

Weisbro's sympathy does have limits; it stops short, for example, with Eldridge Cleaver. The success of Cleaver's 1968 best-seller, "Soul on Ice," Weisbro suggests, is attributable to the fact that "in the late 1960s... black rage in any form widely passed as ethnic authenticity."

By letting his subjects do most of the talking (and, thoroughly footnoting their quotes, for any reader who wants to hear more), Weisbro keeps his history short but always compelling and never oversimplified. He describes, for example Mississippi sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer reproaching Hubert Humphrey at the 1964 Democratic convention, when

characters — sometimes several times in a few pages — further slowing the narrative flow.

Finally, he ends each section with more unnecessary repetition: a summary of the main points he made in the preceding pages. While this type of literary device may be useful in a textbook aimed at students who aren't very bright, it is somewhat insulting in a book designed for presumably intelligent readers.

Marrs' book is too poorly written to be of much interest to casual students of the assassination and too clumsily organized to be of value to serious scholars. Although "Crossfire" is detailed and thorough, its format is slow, repetitious and unwieldy. For these reasons alone, Marrs' work is unlikely to be the final word on the death of John F. Kennedy — even for the last decade of this century.

Bill Wallace is a reporter for The Chronicle.

"the little round-eyed man with his eyes full of tears" sold out black voters to gain the vice-presidency — and conveys volumes in a few pages about the limits of the alliance between the movement and the Democratic Party.

In an all-too-short epilogue, Weisbro surveys the battlegrounds of the 1970s and 1980s: affirmative action, school busing and the depressing reality that black unemployment is now roughly twice what it was when Watts blew up nearly 25 years ago.

There's little cause for immediate optimism by the end of his book. But there is a rich and warmly told history here for the movement to draw on, as soon as it gets moving again.

Kathy Kahn is a criminal defense lawyer in San Francisco.