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# The Washington Spectator

Ben A. Franklin, Editor

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## ASSASSINATION MANIA:

### The Botched Investigation of President Kennedy's Murder Still Maims National Confidence

Cover-ups—not of assassination conspiracies, but of government incompetence and craven lying—have helped sink citizen faith in crucial national institutions to a historic low. A long-lasting legacy of the Kennedy assassination and its still-questioned investigation is the low esteem in which government at every level is now held by citizens, who feel impotent to reform it. “The biggest shift in public attitudes over the past 30 years has been the collapse of confidence in government and politics,” says the respected Washington weekly the *National Journal*. It says the “culture of cynicism that dominates American politics” comes not from inside the Beltway, “it comes from the voters.” When John F. Kennedy died, more than 70 percent of Americans trusted their system, their institutions. Now, an assassination anniversary poll reported in *U.S. News & World Report* says the trusting percentage has sunk to 29. The crash of confidence began in 1963.

Thirty years after President Kennedy was shot to death in Dallas by Lee Harvey Oswald, a CBS poll suggests that a stupefying 50 percent of the American people believe that the Central Intelligence Agency—their own government—was behind it, that three out of four believe “others” were involved, and that eight out of 10 think there was, and is, a cover-up of the perpetrators. Although thirty years of investigation have turned up nothing, persistent allegations, darting from the groundless to the absurd, link or twist into a C.I.A. plot the Pentagon, Fidel Castro, the Russians, the Mafia, Lyndon Johnson, or all acting together—and don’t forget Elvis Presley, Desi Arnaz, and/or space aliens.

It’s easy to ridicule the *assassinuts*. They invite it, many while enriching themselves or swelling their egos. Oliver Stone’s bizarre movie *JFK* grossed more than \$200 million during months on the industry’s top-take box office list. And according to a Library of Congress count, book publishers over the past 30 years have peddled 927 assassination titles—or it may be as many as 2,000, by the

estimate of the *New York Times Book Review*. At least 10 more conspiracy books are just out or are due this year.

As the historian Michael Beschloss put it in *Newsweek*, the shame of this—and, as measured by the disastrous loss of public belief in democracy—the toll of it, is that it has “reinforced the notion that troubling secrets lie behind every public facade.”

Compounding the disillusionment that came with the murder of the then most popular president in poll-taking history, were a crushing number of other post-Camelot events, according to Beschloss and others.

These were the subsequent assassinations of the Rev.

Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy; a rash of flaming urban riots; the hollow end of the tragic war in Vietnam; Watergate and the near-impeachment and resignation of a lying president; and the escape of two lying presidents in the Iran-contra and Iraqgate scandals—not to mention the official denial of what have now been confirmed as mass murders by U.S.-armed and financed forces in Central America, “certified” by the

Reagan and Bush administrations as defenders of human rights.

**THE UNSIMPLE TRUTH**—To begin a kind of national psychotherapy for the Kennedy-assassination syndrome, Congress has said that all—or almost all—the government files that were withheld from, or ignored by, the Warren Commission in its widely disbelieved 1964 report pinning the JFK assassination on Oswald alone—and the murder of Oswald on Jack Ruby alone—must finally be made public. The documents supporting the finding that the two men were lone psychopaths are supposed to be in files on display in a special research facility on the second floor of the National Archives building on Washington’s Pennsylvania Avenue. This hasn’t happened yet. Only an estimated 10 to 20 percent of all JFK files have been released so far. When or if the rest will come is uncertain.

In late August, the Archives opened a JFK-files reading

#### The Same Can Be Said of Profiteering Conspiracy Kooks

*The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary.*

—H. L. Mencken

*Most writers regard the truth as their most valuable possession, and therefore are most economical in its use.*

—Mark Twain

room to a swarm of reporters, most of them on one-day, spot-story assignments. (See a researcher's report on reporters on page 3.) Suddenly on view were 1.5 million pages, many of them meaningless.

There were photocopies of long-ago-published newspaper stories, insanely enough stamped "SECRET," and copies of copies of documents previously made public by the Warren Commission. Some new "disclosures" were released blackened from top to bottom by censors.

One of the few new details is further confirmation that in the weeks before the assassination, the F.B.I. in Dallas had been routinely monitoring Oswald as a recently returned defector to the Soviet Union. The F.B.I. had a thick Oswald file, begun in 1959, the year of his defection. The Dallas F.B.I. agent then on the case knew that Oswald worked at the Texas School Book Depository, a choice targeting point on Kennedy's well-publicized motorcade route, and that Oswald was raging at the F.B.I. for monitoring him. But it failed to mention this to the Secret Service, which protects the President.

What the Secret Service might have done if it had been told of Oswald is clearer now than it was then. It would almost certainly have asked the F.B.I. or the Dallas police to observe Oswald, perhaps even to question and distract him for a few hours, and certainly to clear the upper floors and windows of the School Book Depository as the motorcade passed by. That's now become everyday presidential security practice.

To hide the discovery of the F.B.I.'s failure to finger Oswald as a possible peril, orders were given in the bureau's Dallas field office to destroy the evidence. The file would also have revealed that the bureau had been informed by the C.I.A. that Oswald had recently made a curious visit to the Soviet embassy in Mexico City.

The agency withheld from the F.B.I. Oswald's admiration of Castro, as well as his visit to the Cuban Legation in Mexico City—and that the C.I.A. was even then trying to assassinate Castro.

The Oswald file's disappearance down an F.B.I. office toilet bowl was a "we knew nothing" cover-up, designed to leave the bureau at least visibly unashamed. A hand-written note by J. Edgar Hoover (which surfaced in a previous investigation) revealed the F.B.I.'s director's belief that if the file ever became public, the agency would "never live down this smear which could have been so easily avoided if there had been proper supervision and initiative."

The cover-up of F.B.I. incompetence was a pusillanimous bureaucratic deception. Another, arguably more honorable diversion was President Lyndon Johnson's successful efforts to block press or Congressional speculation that the Soviets and/or Cubans had been involved in Kennedy's death.

**NUCLEAR FALLOUT**—Johnson's aim, a believable one then, was to head off demagogic rhetoric about U.S. retaliation. He feared that this might stir international tensions that could spur the Soviets to a nuclear first strike. In a now-released tape of a Johnson telephone conversation, the new president—24 hours in office—is heard saying that "if Khrushchev moved on us, he could kill 39 million in an hour." We now have more evidence in the JFK case that (1) government agencies were

parochial and inept in protecting the President; (2) that they chose to conceal their incompetence by self-serving decisions that have had the effect of encouraging conspiratorialists and, as Beschloss puts it, "deepening the suspicion that afflicts us today"; and (3) that the well-intended anti-nuclear-war distraction of Johnson wasted the credibility of the Warren Commission, which he said he created to find the truth.

Truth was, and continues to be, a victim of the assassination. In choosing between disbelief in their government and conspiratorial legend, many Americans have chosen legend—or both.

In the end, as Notre Dame University law professor G. Robert Blakey told the *Washington Post*, a conspiracy theory is "like a Rorschach test. It tells you more about the person who looks at it than what's on the inkblot." What Blakey tells about himself is that he is still—more or less, or maybe—a Mafia-conspiracy theorist. Blakey was chief counsel of the House Select Committee on Assassinations during its conspiracy-compounding, late-1970s attempt to redo the Warren Commission study.

**UNINSPIRING REFORMS**—The effort now to try repairing at least some of the damage to public confidence by belated full disclosure, while well intended, bears some familiar, disillusionment-producing traits.

In 1992, amid the fictional trash strewn by the movie *JFK*, Congress took the redeeming step of ordering full public disclosure of all Kennedy-assassination files beginning no later than August 23, 1993, the day the news-hawks flocked to the National Archives building. The 1992 law requires full disclosure unless there are "clear and convincing" reasons for continued secrecy, and to settle that argument the law creates a five-member review board of independent, non-government scholars with full powers to decide what is a valid reason. President Bush avoided making any appointments to the review board.

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## Opening Day at the JFK Archives

By Frederic Allan Maxwell

More than 80 local, national and international reporters and members of TV news crews showed up on August 23 to cover the National Archives' opening of 1.5 million pages of documents on the assassination of President Kennedy. With about two dozen others who were not on deadline, I was there in retrospective research mode, not feeling pressed for spot news.

As I sat at a desk, I was surrounded by still cameras, clicking away, and a TV lens kept poking over my right shoulder. Although I am no Kennedy scholar, I was asked six times to step outside the reading room for TV interviews. A TV friend of mine joked that "I'm not a journalist, I just play one on TV."

Having arrived at the National Archives at 8:30 that morning, I had drawn a relatively low number from an envelope for a place in line to request files when the time came. I was 12th.

The C.I.A. files began to be released just after 9 A.M. Thousands of the files were simply press clippings, once marked "classified" or even "secret." I found a declassified, "secret" C.I.A. memo about a story in the *New Yorker* magazine on Jim Garrison, the discredited New Orleans prosecutor lionized in the movie *JFK*. The attached story pages, clipped from a magazine with more than 600,000 subscribers, had also been marked "secret" by the C.I.A.

I read some Warren Commission testimony by then-C.I.A. Director Allen Dulles—a member of the Warren Commission himself—in which he said, basically, that if Lee Harvey Oswald had ever worked for the C.I.A., he wasn't going to say so. Not much help.

Several TV newsmen ordered from the Archives staff a box of files, took out a page or two with their camera crews recording the luck of the draw, and then returned the files to the box, and the box to the archivists. The revelations that day amounted to next to nothing.

and the nominal deadline for naming members expired in January—five days after Bill Clinton took office.

Clinton did not get around to appointing all the review board members until November, too late for their confirmation by a recessed Senate. Congress is not due back in session until January 25, so it will be impossible for the panel that is empowered to enforce maximum openness to even begin trying until sometime later this year—a third, or more, of the way into its three-year mandate. It may be short, but it won't be a happy lifetime.

An official at the National Archives says that not only have the F.B.I., the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Naval Investigative Service failed so far to produce a single page of the documentation required of them by the year-old law, the House and Senate Intelligence Committees also have delivered none.

The C.I.A., ostensibly in a new post-cold war posture of "openness," has not done much better. An Archives official says the intelligence agency has handed over for public view up to 90,000 pages, but is holding back at least 10,000 more for further security review.

*USA Today* reported finding in the files a Federal interrogation of a turncoat former KGB agent who said the Moscow spooks had found Oswald mentally unstable during his two years in the Soviet Union. In the grab bag of files it also found that Oswald died without returning a book overdue at the Dallas library.

The *New York Times* front-paged finding a report on a 1959 urinalysis of Oswald—its significance unexplained. The *Washington Post* discovered an inch-thick file on a bus passenger who sat with Oswald on his trip to Mexico City a month before the assassination but who apparently didn't notice him. The *Boston Globe* found files showing that Oswald's rent in Dallas was \$59.50 a month, plus \$12 for utilities, and that Oswald had once cashed a check for \$6 at an A&P store, but had bought no groceries.

Talking later with Elizabeth Lockwood, an archivist on the access staff, I learned that among the declassified files are letters to various government officials from hundreds of concerned, if frazzled, citizens offering what they must have felt was helpful information. The letter writers' nominees of supposed plotters and perpetrators of the Kennedy assassination were compiled by the Archives staff.

Alphabetically, and here only in part, the list includes "an aluminum siding saleswoman from Los Angeles," Desi Arnaz, Gene Autry, Lucille Ball, Al Capone, the Catholic Church, the Mayor Daley machine in Chicago, the Dallas police, the Devil, "the drummer in Frank Sinatra's band," Germany, God, H.L. Hunt, IBM, Jackie Kennedy, Jerry Lewis, the Nazis, Richard Nixon, Marina Oswald, the Pope, the Republican Party of Omaha, Roy Rogers, Red Skelton, social scientists, space aliens, Adlai Stevenson, George Wallace, the White Citizens Council, Abraham Zapruder and the Zionists.

Fred Maxwell is a Washington writer. His work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Harper's* and *Newsweek*.

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These may include more documentation of what is already known of the agency's repeated pre-Kennedy-assassination efforts to assassinate Castro. Again,

there may be more bureaucratic bottom-covering in the name of "national security." But then, nobody believes government anymore.

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