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DID DEMOCRACY DIE IN DALLAS?

John Newman says the government's lies about JFK's assassination are tearing America apart.

By Jefferson Morley
Washington Post Staff Writer

The coverup continues. U.S. Army Maj. John Newman didn't put it quite so bluntly to the congressmen and the crowd assembled in Room 2154 of Rayburn House office building yesterday morning, but that was his clear message. Wearing his uniform, he gently damned the government he is sworn to defend.

"A great deal more is at stake than who killed President Kennedy," he said, reading quickly and awkwardly from a prepared statement. "What is at stake is nothing less than the faith of the people in our institutions."

Bold words in a bland setting. The room was three quarters full. The tourists who perhaps expected fireworks about the single bullet theory, the two Oswalds and the three tramps, had filed out, leaving the hard-core students of the assassination. Rep John Conyers (D-Mich), the chairman of the House Government Operations Committee, presided, increasingly disturbed at what he was hearing:

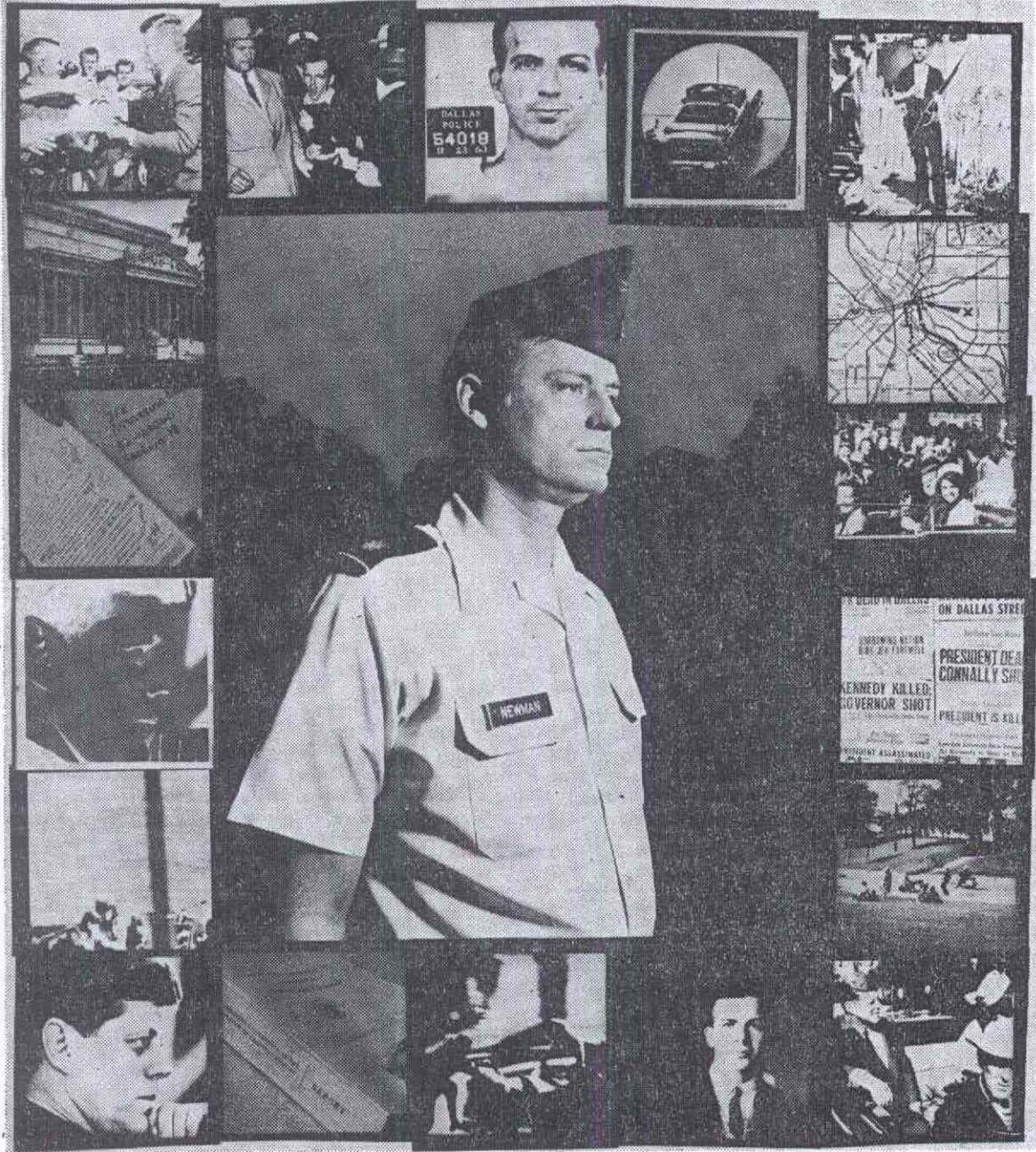
Thirteen months after Congress passed a law requiring public disclosure of all files on

the Kennedy assassination "in timely fashion," a series of experts testified, only 10 to 20 percent of the documents have been made available. The law was passed in the wake of the movie "JFK" to dispel the notion that the government had anything to hide in the case. Yet only the Central Intelligence Agency and the House Select Committee on Assassinations have made a serious effort to comply with the law. Jim Lesar, president of the Assassination Archive and Research Center, testified that of the FBI's 499,000 documents on the subject, it has turned over exactly none. Newman described the FBI's stonewalling as "incomprehensible."

Coming in the same week as a CBS Poll indicating that a stunning 50 percent of the American people believe that CIA had a hand in killing Kennedy, the hearings were a vindication of Newman's belief that the continuing controversy over the assassination is corroding American democracy.

Newman is not exactly your average assassination buff, spouting bizarre trivia and far-fetched theories about the gunfire in Dealey Plaza 30 autumns ago. At age 43, he is a U.S. Army major with 19 years in the service, a specialty in intelligence analysis and a stint at the highest levels of the

See NEWMAN, D8, Col. 1



Army Maj. John Newman: "It's gone way beyond who killed JFK and why. What is at stake is the credibility of our system."

NEWMAN PHOTO BY SYLVIA OTTE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

NEWMAN, From D1

National Security Agency. He is also the author of "JFK in Vietnam," a study of Kennedy's foreign policy that has been praised by William Colby, the former CIA director.

Newman's specialty in assassination research is the CIA's voluminous file on Oswald, all 52 boxes of it. Like other students of the assassination, he will bend your ear about his latest discovery. Such claims are, of course, familiar, heard every year as Nov. 22, our annual commemoration of Camelot and conspiracy, approaches. But Newman's goal is less to uncover some "smoking gun" than to salvage the credibility of the government that he has served all his adult life.

"It's gone way beyond who killed JFK and why," he says of the assassination debate. "What is at stake is the credibility of our system. Will the government tell us the truth? Will the agencies of the government comply in good faith? Because of the withholding of information, people simply don't believe the government—about the assassination—and about lots of other things. If there was conspiracy involving someone in the government, that would be a travesty and a betrayal of our system, but when people don't trust the government to tell the truth, that is a travesty that is far worse."

This point is often lost in the perennial parlor game of the "lone gunman" vs. conspiracy. Passionate interest in the assassination is usually presented as a symptom of paranoia and irrationality—not as a commitment to democratic principles.

'Files Belong to Us'

It is late at night and Newman is rummaging through his files, trying to explain his passion about this subject. "When Oswald returned to the United States from the Soviet Union in June 1962, he and his wife traveled on a boat called the *Maasdam*," he says. "A CIA station in Scandinavia generated this five-page report on Oswald's trip."

Newman extracts a document from a file folder lying on the carpeted floor of his den. Four of the five pages are blacked out. Censored. The document is an affront to Newman's Capraesque belief in the American system. The eroticism of its secrets drives him wild. What could be the threat to national security from a country that is no longer an enemy of the United States and, in fact, no longer exists?

"Really, I think the government no

longer has any choice," he says. "If it wants to rescue a shred of credibility, it must release everything in its possession, every document. Those files belong to us."

Newman grows pensive.

"What do people want on the assassination? I don't think they want the solution tomorrow. They just want an end to this insanity, this zero-sum discussion where you have to choose between conspiracy and a lone gunman. It's too early to make that call. The more I learn, the more I think that the real story of the Kennedy assassination is not going to turn out like anyone thinks."

Newman's problem is that, by the standards of the Washington media establishment, he is suspect. He has emerged as a Washington spokesman for the critics of the Warren Commission, who have sought for three decades to penetrate the veil of governmental secrecy surrounding the Kennedy assassination. Worse than that, Newman also worked with Oliver Stone, perhaps the least popular man among Washington officialdom, serving as a paid consultant on Stone's conspiratorial epic "JFK." Newman's

Vietnam book, was published with Stone's assistance, and his thesis that Kennedy would not have committed ground troops to Vietnam, they add, is vigorously disputed by some historians.

In the eyes of Washington officialdom, these things make him suspect. To be sure, the assassination is a font of madness in American life. Those who delve deeply into what happened in downtown Dallas at half past noon on Nov. 22, 1963, do often become obsessed. In public debates on the question, visions of Camelot, fantasies of conspiracy, grisly autopsy photographs, and ad hominem rhetoric converge in a vast, fascinating stew of popular culture: *Conspiracy! Case closed! We'll never know. Who cares?*

The question is whether John Newman—patriot, pilgrim, soldier, and media entrepreneur—has anything meaningful to add to this cacophony of democracy.

The Bookend Theory

"The headline here is that the CIA was very interested in Oswald, they lied about it, and they're still lying about it," Newman says. He is speaking now of what he has discovered, or "recovered," as he terms it, in the assassination files.

The agency has always maintained

that it had no contact with Oswald and that its interest in him was purely routine. That's why, according to the agency, it did not open a file on Oswald until 13 months after he had defected to the Soviet Union.

Newman claims that he can prove the interest was more than routine, but he takes care to emphasize that he is not anti-CIA. He praises James Woolsey, the director of Central Intelligence, for his decision in October to release 10,000 additional pages of assassination-related documents.

Newman, working on a \$2,000 consulting fee from the Public Broadcasting System's documentary team, "Frontline," sat down with the 51 boxes of CIA documents on Oswald. The insights they yielded were subtle, not startling.

His biggest find came when he held up a document to the fluorescent lights of the second floor reading room in the National Archives and noticed a scrawl in the upper right hand corner. It read, "Andy Anderson: OO on Oswald."

An OO file, Newman learned, was



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one maintained by the Domestic Contact Division. If there was an OO file on Oswald then the Agency had been in contact with the accused assassin upon his return from the Soviet Union in February 1962.

Other researchers have long suspected as much. In the early 1960s, the CIA was interviewing 25,000 people a year returning from Communist countries, including people who had done nothing more suspicious than spend a holiday on the beaches of Yugoslavia. Was it really plausible that the CIA had somehow overlooked a former Marine who had defected to the Soviet Union telling a U.S. diplomat that he intended to betray U.S. secrets?

"Think of it as two bookends," Newman explains. "One bookend is Oswald's defection to the Soviet Union in September, 1959. The Agency didn't do its job then — they didn't open a file on him. That was true. But they also lied, saying that the reason they didn't open a file was because they weren't interested."

"The other bookend," he continues, "concerns Oswald's return to the United States in February 1962. Now the Agency *does* do its job—they debrief the guy. And they lie about that too."

"The fact that they lied doesn't mean anything in itself," he notes calmly. "But analytically it raises the stakes about the nature of their interest in Oswald before the assassination. They were very interested," he says, suddenly passionate. "The question is: Why?"

Case Closed

"Forgotten in most recent studies of the assassination is Oswald," observes Gerald Posner, author of "Case Closed," a much-touted defense of Oswald's sole guilt. "He is referred to on-

ly briefly and often presented as a sterile figure. ... His intricate personality and temperament are obscured under a deluge of technical details."

Posner, a Wall Street lawyer, is a devotee of William of Occam, the medieval logician, who argued that the simplest explanation of any phenomenon is usually the best. With Occam's razor, Posner shreds Newman's bookends.

The CIA's 13-month delay in opening a file on Oswald: Posner observes that when the CIA finally opened its file in November 1960, it did so in response to a query from the State Department. "That there was no Agency file on Oswald prior to 1960," he argues, "is further evidence he had no connection to U.S. intelligence through the time of his defection to Russia."

As for the Agency's apparent failure to debrief Oswald on his return, Posner reports that "Between 1958 and 1963, the CIA did not automatically debrief returning defectors, instead allowing the FBI to report significant results from its interviews. Of the 22 American defectors who returned to the U.S. during those five years, the CIA only interviewed four, and all interviews related to particular intelligence matters."

Newman allows that benign explanations cannot be ruled out. "I just have a problem with a guy saying the case is closed before he has seen all the evidence," he adds. "Let's see the rest of the documents before we say that."

We'll Never Know

Newman is particularly impatient with the idea that the assassination might remain a mystery forever. He notes that the release of government files has just begun to clear the air. Last year, the Dallas Police Department made public its arrest records of Nov. 22, 1963, for the first time, and the fable of the "three tramps" was laid to rest. These were three disheveled men photographed in Dealey Plaza on the day of the assassination being led away by a Dallas policeman; conspiracy buffs insisted they were CIA operatives. In 1992, Ray and Mary LaFontaine, a husband and wife investigative team for the Houston Post, obtained the long-secret arrest records and proved that the tramps were in fact just tramps.

Earlier this month, The Lafontaines broke another interesting story about the assassination, and Newman brought it up in his testimony yesterday. Another "tramp" arrested that day was one John Elrod, who seems to have been Lee Oswald's cellmate for a few hours on November 22, 1963.

On August 11, 1964, Elrod told his

story to two FBI agents in Memphis. The long-suppressed report said that while Elrod was in the cell that day, the police brought by a man with an injured face. The man looked at the accused assassin. Elrod recalled his cellmate saying that he recognized the man, that he had been in a meeting with him at a motel and that he drove a Thunderbird. Elrod recalled his cellmate saying that another man at the meeting was Jack Ruby. It was Ruby, of course, who killed Oswald three days later.

The Elrod story ran on *Hard Copy* last night, with an endorsement from none other than Oliver Stone. It is tempting to dismiss the LaFontaines' story as an absurd grasping at conspiratorial straws. But the LaFontaines are credible reporters who know the Dallas milieu in which Lee Oswald and Jack Ruby lived and died. They have independent corroboration for various aspects of Elrod's story, information that was not publicly available.

It turns out there *was* a man with severe facial cuts being held in the Dallas Jail on that day. His name was Lawrence Reginald Miller. Four days before the assassination, he led Dallas policemen on a 60 mile per hour car chase before wrapping his flashy sports car around a utility pole. His face went through the windshield. The car, which was not identified in the Dallas newspaper accounts of the crash, was a Thunderbird. The trunk was loaded with military rifles and automatic weapons stolen from a Texas National Guard Armory. The other occupant of the car was a man named Donnel Darius Whitter. Whitter, according to an FBI report, was a mechanic for Jack Ruby.

Newman says he doesn't know if Elrod's story is true. But he pointed out

in his testimony that among the hundreds of thousands of documents still unreleased by the FBI is a 14-page report on Donnel Whitter, Ruby's mechanic. The document was reviewed by the FBI last June and it was decided that none of it could be made public.

"I find the withholding of such documents unsatisfactory," Newman said, "and not in the spirit of the JFK Records Act."

Who Cares?

One of the most respected independent researchers of the assassination is a Mary Ferrell. A retired legal secretary, she has, over the course of three decades, built up one of the largest private archives of assassination related material. She welcomes all serious students of the subject. She assisted Posner in his research. She talks on the phone regularly with Newman. She is an eloquent voice about the importance of the Kennedy assassination.

"I am much concerned that we are on the threshold of a failure from which there will be no forgiveness," she told an assassination conference in Dallas last October. "Time is our most relentless and uncompromising enemy . . . Of course we will be scoffed at and demeaned by the media and the wagging fingers of Warren Commission survivors, scolding us for refusing to believe the conclusions of these honorable men. . . . But history teaches us that significant changes are often accomplished by small numbers of people facing large odds. Many of them have succeeded in defiance of the government . . . If we are truly living in the land of the free and the home of the brave, we'd better damn well prove it now."

John Newman has enlisted.