

The death of a president

ON THE eve of the 30th anniversary of John Kennedy's assassination the flow of books on the subject is, if anything, increasing. All who were more than toddlers on November 22nd 1963 can remember where they were when they heard about it. The photographic images are indelible. The president and the first lady arrive at the airport, shaking hands before entering the limousine. Jackie Kennedy, wearing a pink suit with matching pillbox hat, holds a bouquet of roses. The president pushes aside a stray hair as he waves and smiles. The motorcade passes through cheering crowds as it approaches Dealy Plaza. "You can't say Dallas doesn't love you, Mr President," says Texas's first lady, Nellie Connally, as the car makes the sharp turn from Houston to Elm Street in front of the Texas School Book Depository.

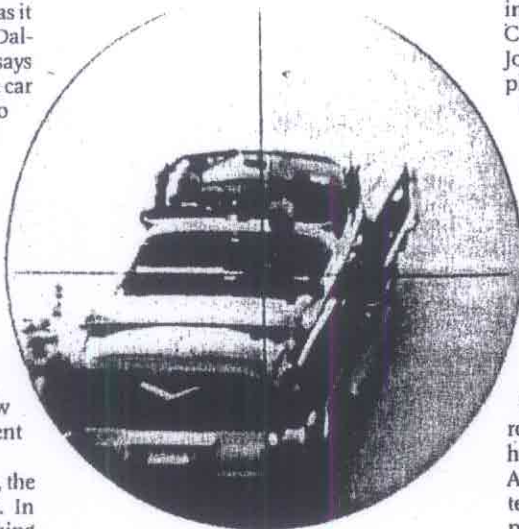
The next six seconds are the most studied and disputed in American history. More than 2,000 books have dealt with the assassination, as have many television programmes and several films. Fascination with the shooting has even gone high-tech, with assassination discussion groups on computer networks. Their hot topic, debated over their modems, is the new theory that Kennedy was shot by accident from the front by a secret-service agent.

As the 30th anniversary approaches, the controversy is more heated than ever. In 1991 "JFK", a brilliant piece of film-making by Oliver Stone, was based on the only assassination theory ever tested in court (and rejected by a jury after less than an hour's deliberation). It brought the controversy to a post-Kennedy generation and put pressure on the federal government to open the remaining files. Recently, in compliance with a campaign promise, the Clinton administration released 185,000 previously classified documents. Nonetheless, many thousands of FBI and CIA documents remain secret and many of those released were heavily censored, fuelling the contention that the cover-up continues.

The publication of "Case Closed" by Gerald Posner* is another milestone in the examination of this great American mys-

tery. Along with "The Death of a President" by William Manchester, it is one of the rare books on the subject that defends the Warren Commission's finding that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin and that Jack Ruby acted alone in killing him.

As the antithesis of "JFK", "Case Closed", has received much attention in the press, including a cover story in *US News and World Report*. The book, however, does little more than smugly slant every piece of disputed evidence in favour of the lone-as-



Seen through the assassin's sights

sassin theory—an approach exactly opposite to that of conspiracy writers, who follow every inference in the evidence to their own illogical conclusions. "Case Closed" no more closes the case than the many volumes inspired by conspiracy theories over the past 30 years.

Mr Posner devotes many pages to attacking these ideas. The theories range from the serious to the absurd, and often invite attack or ridicule. One popular book, "Best Evidence" by David Lifton, claimed that Kennedy's body was surgically altered on Air Force One on the return flight to Washington, DC. Although this theory is nonsense, it is generally agreed that the Kennedy autopsy is one of the poorest on record. Several

writers have argued that there was a second Oswald or that a KGB agent took the real Oswald's place when he (the real Oswald) defected to the Soviet Union. Others contend that Oswald was an agent for the CIA or the FBI or the KGB or the Mafia or the Cubans or a right-wing cabal or any combination of the above. Many theorists link Oswald to Ruby, who may also, they contend, have been a hitman for the Mafia.

Some go further by bringing into the conspiracy J. D. Tippit, the Dallas police officer whom Oswald was charged with killing after the assassination. Jim Garrison, the hero of "JFK", claimed that Oswald spoke the truth when he said at the Dallas police headquarters that he was "just a patsy" who had tried to prevent the assassination. The people and events surrounding the assassination are an inexhaustible mine for conspiracy theories—which even managed to implicate Lyndon Johnson. In "The Texas Connection", Craig Zirbel reasons that Johnson was from Texas, the murder took place in Texas, *ipso facto* Johnson was behind the assassination.

The assassination has become a business. The JFK Assassination Information Centre in Dallas offers books, videotapes, research material and key rings and buttons, some with photos of Oswald under the caption: "I didn't shoot anyone... I'm just a patsy". The centre maintains a museum, as does the converted Texas School Book Depository, now renamed the Sixth Floor. Visitors to Dallas can take a bus tour of Dealy Plaza, Oswald's rooming house and the Texas cinema where he was apprehended, along with other sites. Assassination researchers, who disdain the term "buffs", hold regular conventions and publish newsletters such as *JFK Today*. The Assassination Archives and Research Centre in Washington, DC, is a more serious focal point for amateur and professional historians. Besides "JFK" the assassination was featured in two B movies, "Executive Action" and "Ruby", and figured in this summer's hit "In the Line of Fire".

November 22nd 1963 and its aftermath play through the American mind like a recurrent nightmare. Only a handful of true believers cling to one theory or another. Most Americans do not fully believe any one version and despair of knowing the truth. It is unlikely that the search will ever end. Down the shelves from the books on Kennedy's assassination books are others claiming a conspiracy and cover-up in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

*Random House; 607 pages; \$25. Little Brown; £8.99