

Nonfiction

Who didn't kill JFK?

Gerald Posner shines the cold light of sanity on the host of conspiracy

Case Closed:

Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK

By Gerald Posner

Random House, 607 pages, \$25

Reviewed by Jeffrey Toobin

A staff writer at the New Yorker and author of "Opening Arguments: A Young Lawyer's First Case—United States v. Oliver North"

Undertaking a serious investigation of President John F. Kennedy's assassination is a little like conducting a sober study of unidentified flying objects. There is nothing inherently frivolous about either subject. But both fields have been dominated for so long by crackpots and nut cases that a sort of guilt by association attaches to each new arrival. Don't we all, on hearing that an otherwise respectable author like Gerald Posner has taken on the death of JFK (and the life of "JFK"), wonder if the fellow has lost his marbles?

He hasn't. Unlike many of the 2,000 other books that have been written about the Kennedy assassination, Posner's "Case Closed" is a resolutely sane piece of work. More importantly, "Case Closed" is utterly convincing in its thesis, which seems, in light of all that has transpired over the past 30 years, almost revolutionary. His thesis is this: Lee Harvey Oswald killed Kennedy by himself. There was no conspiracy. Fundamentally, the Warren Commission was right.

The bulk of "Case Closed" is devoted to Oswald's pathetic life story. His father died two months before he was born. His mother was erratic and possibly insane. Oswald had moved 21 times (and attended 11 schools)

by the time he was 17.

His stormy childhood led to his fixation with a sort of infantile leftism, which manifested itself in lifelong interest in communism and the Soviet Union. Notwithstanding these inclinations, he joined the Marines, but (one of the many myths that Posner explodes) never gained access to any great national secrets in the Corps. The truth is more mundane. He was simply a washout.

After his military service, Oswald embarked on the most bizarre chapter of his life, the one that became the fount for many of the conspiracy theories. He defected to Russia. It was, in part, a political act. But mostly it seems to have been a rather poignant attempt to get attention.

For a while Oswald was a modest celebrity in Minsk—the American Defector!—but the novelty quickly wore off, and he became just another Soviet trying to get along on lousy food in a too-small apartment. After about three years in Russia, he came home. The Soviets—even the KGB—never had any use for him and were happy to see him go. Oswald and his Russian wife, Marina, settled near Dallas in 1962. He continued to drift, quietly desperate.

Posner spends a great deal of time on one event the conspiracy theorists tend to ignore. On April 10, 1963, using the same mail-order Mannlicher-Carcano rifle that he would fire at JFK, Oswald attempted to assassinate a right-wing retired general named Edwin Walker, who was prominent in Dallas politics.

By some fluke, Oswald's shot only grazed the general's hair. The CIA, the KGB and the Mafia—the most commonly



According to "Case Closed," the Warren Commission was right: Lee Harvey Oswald (above) was the lone assassin of President Kennedy.

cited of Oswald's alleged co-conspirators—had no reason to want Walker dead. If Oswald had any co-conspirators in the Kennedy assassination, they certainly would not have wanted him to take the risk of first trying to kill Walker. The episode is strong circumstantial evidence that Oswald was simply a lone crazyman with a powerful rifle.

The heart of "Case Closed" is a reconstruction of the events of November 22, 1963. Posner rides all of the conspiracy theorists' favorite hobbyhorses straight out of town.

Did Oswald have time to fire all three shots? Yes—the first one missed, the second hit both Kennedy and John Connally and the third blew off the top of the President's head. Was that

second shot a "magic bullet," which survived in an impossibly pristine state after injuring two men? No—the bullet performed as intended, and subsequent tests on cadavers showed that other bullets sustained approximately the same degree of damage.

What of the famous grassy knoll? Was Kennedy shot from the front as well as from behind? No—there were 178 witnesses to the shooting, and not one saw a gunman on the knoll. Several saw Oswald fire. Kennedy's and Connally's wounds are consistent with shots from the rear.

If Kennedy was shot from the rear, why does the Zapruder film show his head snapping back in that direction? Two reasons—because the bullet de-

theorists

stroyed JFK's cortex and caused a neuromuscular spasm that jolted his head backward and because of the "jet effect," the same phenomenon in physics that causes a rocket to go forward when its jet fuel is ejected backward. In detailed (and often amusing) footnotes, Posner exposes the factual errors, fantasies and frauds that the conspiracy theorists have relied on to explain the events of that day.

Posner concludes with a short history of the Warren Commission—and the backlash against it. The tragedy of the Commission, as Posner sees it, is that its deliberations were rushed, secretive and incomplete. Worse, the FBI and CIA never owned up to all they knew about Oswald and events relating to the assassination.

Those omissions were critical—not because they would have changed the Commission's conclusions but because the dissembling encouraged the conspiracy theorists' flights of fancy. As it turned out, the Warren Commission was perfection itself compared with the "investigations" that followed it. In particular, Posner's account of Jim Garrison—the corrupt and incompetent New Orleans district attorney whom Oliver Stone made the hero of his film "JFK"—is by turns horrifying and hilarious.

I started "Case Closed" as a skeptic—and slightly put off by the presumptuous title. To my mind historical truth is always a slippery thing. The chances of knowing for sure what happened in any event—much less one as murky as the Kennedy assassination—seem remote. But this fascinating and important book won me over. Case closed, indeed.