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JFK Case Might Never Be Closed

By PATRICK ERCOLANO

Book depository. Dealey Plaza. Magic bullet. Oswald. Mannlicher-Carcano. Tippit. Triple underpass. Zapruder film. Ruby.

The names and phrases associated with the murder of President John F. Kennedy are as indelible and mysterious as ever, almost 30 years after the president was shot to death one sunny day in Dallas.

The indelibility of the tragedy hurts, still. The mystery makes for a different kind of pain, the pain of frustration.

That may explain why writer-attorney Gerald Posner has won heaps of praise (accompanied by huge sighs of relief) for his current best-seller, "Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK."

Essentially, the 607-page book says the Warren Commission was right: Oswald was a lone wacko who took out the president with two shots from the Texas Book Depository. No conspiracies. No mob job. No Oliver Stone fantasies of a military-intelligence hit. Put away your paranoid plots and go home, folks. We had the truth all along. Case closed.

Not quite, it seems. Predictably, Mr. Posner's book has drawn fire from critics who claim the author, in building his case, used the lawyerly technique of citing evidence that buttresses his points while ignoring information that might knock his argument flat. Among the harshest critics are two Maryland history professors who have studied the events of the 1960s, particularly the life and death of the 35th president.

Both John Newman of the University of Maryland at College Park and Gerald McKnight of Hood College

in Frederick contend that the case can't be considered closed given that the U.S. government only recently released some 90,000 pages of official documents related to the assassination.

"Posner wrote his book before these papers came out," Mr. Newman says. "Not all the information is in, so I think it's impossible to say who was behind the shooting." He has pored over the documents as a consultant to a forthcoming PBS documentary on the assassination.

"To say the case is closed at this point," Mr. Newman adds, "would be like a college freshman setting out to study 10 political models and then deciding, midway through the first model, that that was the best one."

Mr. McKnight, who teaches a course on the murders of JFK and Martin Luther King, is more blunt. He calls "Case Closed" a "dreadful book" that amounts to "a lawyer's brief in defense of the Warren Commission. Truth isn't Posner's client."

He also says, "Look for a book next year by someone very reputable — it won't be me — who will seriously challenge Posner."

Somehow that doesn't come as a shock. The JFK assassination long has been a thriving industry for numerous conspiracy buffs and Warren Commission apologists. It's not likely to fade anytime soon. After the Posner book is challenged, then *that* book will no doubt get a retort. Then *that* one. And on and on.

Tied up as it is in the pursuit of a buck, this endless exercise of the assassination buffs is at least partly based on the desire to explain the tragedy in Dallas. But that's a vain

wish, the two professors claim.

"There's no way you can solve this case," says Mr. McKnight. "If our government didn't make an honest attempt at the time, how are we to do it now? The leads are too cold."

Besides, says Mr. Newman, "Even if someone made a deathbed confession and offered all the verifying documents, nobody would buy it. We've been made so cynical by the way our institutions handled the Kennedy assassination, the Vietnam war, Watergate — this string of events that happened roughly within a 10-year period."

As Mr. McKnight puts it, those volcanic 10 years were "a turnaround time for our country. We learned our government lies, and lies repeatedly. We lost our innocence in terms of trusting our leaders. It's like the young person who becomes an adult and discovers the world isn't such a lovely place. He's wiser for it, but not really any happier."

In the long run, say both professors, the whos, whys and hows of the assassination aren't so important as the questions about the government's actions in the matter over the past 30 years.

"That's the reason I see some good in the recent release of the assassination documents," says Mr. Newman. "We need to know what our government is up to, and when they won't tell us, we have to raise a fuss til they do. Look, I can live with my leaders making mistakes, but I can't live with lies and cover-ups. I want to know the truth."

Patrick Ercolano writes editorials for The Baltimore Sun.