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# VIRGINIA COUNTRY

IN GREENSVILLE COUNTY  
A CYCLIST'S GOOBER PARADISE

WARRENTON'S  
"CHARRETTE"

RICHMOND MONASTERY  
URBAN, INVOLVED



# Harold Weisberg – Skulker of Assassins

by William F. Ryan

*Lee Harvey Oswald could not have been persona non grata with the FBI  
Malfeasance, Misfeasance, Nonfeasance  
Truth is a shattered mirror  
Lords of misrule  
A returned medievalism*

**A**damstown, Hyattstown, Shookstown, Sugar Loaf Mountain... quiet and still and green. If you can get lost out there, you can hide sure enough. Or retreat from the mayhem of the nation's capital. This is Frederick, Maryland. Holsteins graze in the fields and peer over fences at infrequent automobiles. Mostly farmers live on the Western Maryland hillsides. But spies retire here and write books. And super-feds who burned themselves out, tipped their whiskey and told themselves their work was done. But you can sense a secret industry in that woodland on the way to rural Pennsylvania. Official Washington doesn't like it, and so it exists. One of its mavens is Harold Weisberg, a hero of the fracas of the 1960s. No better investigator ever haunted the gunmetal gray buildings of official Washington or stared down Federal judges or brushed off gumshoes from the F.B.I. and CIA. He was the first to write and publish a book – later, a series – exposing the criminal cover-up of the John F. Kennedy murder, and the horrors that followed.

Weisberg owns a big spread of woods just off a mountain road. A

long driveway burrows through the tree cover to his ranch-type house. From outside the place seems deposited by a cyclone, like Dorothy's down to Oz. Front and back, wild creatures frolic in the tall grass, brazen and fearless. Titmouse, bluejay, cardinal, chickadee, purple finch, wren, chipmunk, rabbit, day lily, tiger lily. And red squirrels. I saw them in pairs. If a red squirrel could rear his head unabashed anywhere, it would be in the Weisbergs' yard. Harold and his wife, Lil, have lived in this Eden since October 1, 1967. A retirement home. Before that, they were farmers on 14 acres in nearby Hyattstown. They raised chickens of all types, and waterfowl. No crops. Harold Weisberg sold the farm when he resumed his career as an investigative writer. He'd done it all before. Only the mysteries and their consequences were new and terrible.

Today he's a septuagenarian with thrombosis. He takes anti-coagulants. He can't get very comfortable in most chairs but sometimes scales a ladder against doctors' rules to putter in his garden. His sight in one eye has been poor since birth. In the basement of his Frederick home is a double row of file cabinets. Those drawers and bins contain records ob-

tained under the Freedom of Information Act. On the far wall are some 30 more. An additional dozen are against another wall. In Harold's office are boxes of more FoIA records, plus records of the lawsuits to obtain those documents. Harold Weisberg has declared in print that he has probably filed suit in federal court under the FoIA to obtain classified, restricted and otherwise sensitive information, more than any other U.S. citizen.

Maybe so. He's good at it. The irony is that his basement is a vault of volatile debris that remained unused when his frail health slammed the brakes on his writing in the late 1970s. His wife can descend those steps, and so can the young graduate students who research their own papers in the cellar. He allows access to almost anyone and rarely, if ever, questions the motives of the curious. Copying machines are there, too. Anybody can copy anything.

"If you don't practice what you preach, you're not much of a person," he remarked to me. "If you believe in freedom of information, it can't be only for you."

Nearby is Hood College, the permanent home of the Harold Weisberg Archives. Repository of all



TO  
PVT. HAROLD WEISBERG  
FROM  
JOHN HOLMSTEN

those records, documents, files, briefs, notes, photos, clues and traces on the paper trail left by the FBI and CIA. Some 65 boxes are interred at Hood. A smaller Weisberg archive is at the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, through the assistance of Dr. David Wrone, who teaches history there. The boxes and folders at those institutions house the stunning and damning source material from which Harold Weisberg produced seven books. One of them probes the shooting of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. The other six are exposés of how sinister and powerful federal machinery has distorted, obfuscated and hidden most facts about the assassination of President Kennedy. These volumes can throttle your nerves. They are well done, with the care and skill of a seasoned journalist and investigator. The first of them was *Whitewash*, an excoriation of the F.B.I. and a salvo at the Warren Commission and its frail fortress of a Report.

*Whitewash* was first issued by its author in 1965 but didn't make it into book stores or reviewers' hands until 1966. Self-published books inevitably get a raw deal, but *Whitewash* couldn't be ignored. It was a sensation in Washington, as was its sequel, *Whitewash II*. Weisberg and other resourceful skeptics of the Warren Report stirred a maelstrom of renewed outrage and inquiry into the John Kennedy killing. The others, writing assassination buffs, weren't colleagues or even acquaintances of Weisberg's. He was the first to reopen the murder case, on his own volition, his own steam, with no subpoena power. The long experience of his life and work ideally suited him for the job.

We all thought so. When we heard about him we knew, for a private citizen with a free and public mind, he just had to be one helluva tough guy. Whoever he was. The dude who wrote *Whitewash*? Sure. Right...

A.D. 1966, the warm weeks. I was near the center of undergrad bohemia of the American Univer-

sity. We were truth gangsters. Too hip to be hippies, too sardonic to buy into absolutes or panaceas or the faith of LSD. Nothing was acceptable, so we hot-lighted everything. We despised the Vietnam War and the scabrous future it threatened for us.

John F. Kennedy had no doubt dealt some cards he wasn't showing in 1960 and gotten himself shot to death in '63. We didn't trust in what he stood for, either, but we revered him for his image and his promise. His sudden death was scary and preposterous and screamed for justice. Like the Vietnam War. If we questioned the war and protested, we doubted and rejected the Warren Commission Report and its special pleaders. The war and the Kennedy assassination conjoined as a single issue. Loss of leadership, loss of credibility, loss of lives. The list of heroes on the barricades rolled out longer. Bertrand Russell, Bernard Fall, Allen Ginsberg, I. F. Stone, Dwight MacDonald, Norman Mailer... Harold Weisberg. And how about this wildcat Weisberg? Word had it that he lived right here in D.C., or very close by. Did you catch his act on *The Allen Burke Show*?

We never looked him up in 1966, or '67, or '68, when it really mattered. But a short time ago I was at Harold Weisberg's sylvan home in Frederick. He prefers to be called Harold. Once he's talking he smokes cigarettes and drinks black coffee. He speaks his mind and his memories in a Delmarva accent with gruff markers of Philadelphia, Delaware and Maryland. Another original, all right.

Harold Weisberg was born in North Philadelphia on April 8, 1913. His parents were Jewish immigrants from eastern Rumania. His mother, née Sarah Spiegel, told him she was from Bessarabia; his father, Fred Weisberg, from Moldavia. Harold's mother was eight when she first set foot in the U.S. His father was a young man when he arrived and earned enough money at his store to send for his brother. By 1906 they were able to pay passage across the Atlantic for the rest of their families.

Harold has two sisters. His family lived on North Opal Street in an immigrant working-class neighborhood. His father and uncle were both grocers in urban mom and pop stores. He said that his mother couldn't or wouldn't speak of life in the Old Country, and his father had little good to say for it. But Harold's maternal grandmother talked about the pogroms and oppression of the Russian overlords. She lived into her eighties and always insisted that the Czar knew what was going on, even in the *shtetls* of Rumania. The people feared the marauding Cossacks who ransacked their homes and slaughtered their babies. The grandmother had escaped one pogrom with two children - Harold's mother and her oldest brother. Another brother was killed.

"I'm the first member of my family born in freedom, to simplify it," Harold asserted. "And I think no matter how far back you go in antiquity, if you go back to Abraham, that's got to be true. It is not easy for people either to understand or appreciate."

Harold's memory of his Philadelphia boyhood is almost crystalline. As soon as he could get his bearings, he was a solo adventurer. He recalls primary schools on Susquehanna Avenue, and how the streetcars were a blessing on the broad avenues. Even as a small boy, Harold was a walker in the city. His home was three blocks south of the old Philadelphia ball park, then known as Shibe Park Stadium, and later, Connie Mack Stadium. Five blocks to the northeast was Baker Field, where the Philadelphia Phillies played. Near Shibe Park was a gully excavated for the Pennsylvania Railroad tracks, the main line headed north for New York. He was a boy in an era of transition, when horse-drawn wagons still hauled loads and fine ladies drove battery-powered electric cars.

He was still a Philadelphia kid when he first learned of radio. A family on Opal Street managed to afford a crystal set, a luxury in a working-class neighborhood. They heard on the air that Warren G.

Harding had won the Presidential election the day before. The news was hollered all over the tiny street.

A short while later, opportunity looked brighter for the Weisbergs due south on the rail line in Wilmington. They established new homes and grocery stores on the southeast side of town. Harold recalls that they were re-settled in 1926.

He attended Wilmington High School, the only public high school for the whole city at that time. About 3,000 students took their places in two huge four-story buildings connected by two enclosed bridges. He was named managing editor of the school newspaper. It was his first foray into journalism.

About this time he spotted the full-page ads in the daily papers for the Haldeman-Julius Little Blue Books. He mail-ordered bunches of the cheap paperbacks from Kansas frequently. There were always a few of them in his pockets. He read them as he walked. They were an underground education in the classics, literature, philosophy, evolution, socialism, psychoanalysis, sexology, popular science, religious skepticism and revisionist history. Specialty items in the Blue Books catalogues were pamphlets on the "guilt" for the World War by Harry Elmer Barnes, exposés of the Ku Klux Klan, the Scopes Monkey Trial, the Sacco and Vanzetti case, lynchings in the South, and bigoted pulp-thumpers. What particularly caught Harold's attention were the booklets on the scandal and corruption during the Harding presidency. A few years later followed a series of sly, barbed tracts smearing President Hoover. Three of those were by-lined E. Haldeman-Julius himself and accused Hoover of international larceny and other crimes against humanity. A spate of anti-Hoover books in the established trade press flooded the market in 1932. None was more alarming and infuriating to the president than the attacks in the Little Blue Books. Haldeman-Julius offered a cheap crash course in brash debunking and timely muckracking to a generation or two



photos by Sharon Ryan

aspiring young reporters.

At the University of Delaware, Harold began studies in engineering but was compelled by poor eyesight to give them up. He couldn't even use graph paper without frustration. He changed to Arts and Sciences. Inevitably he was one of the editors of the college paper. In off-campus hours he was a reporter for the *Wilmington Morning News*, the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* and the *Philadelphia Daily News*. He realized he could earn something like a living as an on-the-fly reporter for the Philly papers. He attended the University of Delaware in Newark for three years (1930-1933). Alongside any class work he was caught up in newspapering, on campus and for the bright editors of city dailies who nurtured the promise in him. He left college without a degree. But he stuck by the press gang in his native Philadelphia. Then his father died in 1935. Perhaps it was time to break some ties.

Harold was offered a job in the Information Office of the U.S. De-

partment of Agriculture. But the slot was a disappointment when he realized he was little more than a file clerk. He felt as if the agency chose to forget about him on the level of \$1,440 a year. He needed an eye operation badly, but couldn't take leave from work. Harold quit in disgust. The government soon placed him as an administrative assistant to the Farm Security Administration. In 1936 the agency loaned him to Congress. He was assigned as an editor and investigator for the Senate Civil Liberties Committee, Subcommittee on Education and Labor, and remained on staff till 1939. This started his ordeal by fire.

In that era before Xerox copies, Senators on investigative bodies worked from legal size folders called briefs. On the right-hand side of a folder were the questions that Harold and other investigators prepared for Senators to ask. On the left-hand side were stored the exhibits. All this material was typed in carbon copies. In 1937, Harold was investigating a major auto manufacturer for alleged use of spies within the labor unions. All of a sudden the exhibits were not there. Some records subpoenaed by the subcommittee seemed no longer to exist. In the hearing it transpired that the corporate attorney had destroyed the records personally. This maneuver put the lawyer in very good stead with his client firm. Harold had a cold stare at corrupt practice among the mighty and the rewards reaped by manipulators, scoundrels and snickering engineers of invidious acts. As a Senate investigator he saw first-hand the propensity of evil in high places. He had read of the monstrous sell-outs and full-scale betrayals of the nation's trust in the caustic muckraking of the Little Blue Books. Now it all had a noxious psychic smell on Capitol Hill. I sense that Harold Weisberg has been dogged by the puzzle of how pervasive that smell can be in the land where his parents sought freedom.

He has been learning about it ever since.

Young Harold Weisberg was first

of all an investigative writer, even in service to the U.S. Senate. No glamor profession, but a noble one to summon nerve, guts and 36-hour days.

All reporters look for trouble, and good ones always find it. They make enemies for life. Harold made some behemoths. In the chill bite of the Great Depression, when the political climate was noxious with paranoia and straw dogging, he ran afoul of Congressman Martin Dies (1901-1972), megalomaniac from Texas. As the New Deal progressed, young Dies made his mark as a rogue Democrat who opposed the labor movement and most legislation directed at the betterment of aliens or others outside the mainstream. At the close of the decade he was a leading saboteur of the boldest innovations of President Roosevelt. Dies was after headlines and page one photos. Maybe even the White House. His mark in American History was the creation in May, 1938 of the House Committee Investigating Un-American Activities. Chairman Dies indulged his own bigotry by exploiting the nation's anxiety over the mounting turmoil overseas. The right-wing press and a cadre of special interests stood to gain by hysteria over Nazi and Communists subversives in the U.S. Dies presented himself as the defender of freedom and guardian of the flag. With a small budget and staff and a lot of noise, he cast a menacing shadow coast to coast in a short time. No group or person was exempt from Dies and his scalp-hunters.

In 1939, Harold intended to write a book on the Dies Committee. He never did. All the same, someone must have passed the word around Capitol Hill. Dies attempted to indict him on two charges. Harold told me that he had interviewed no one in connection with Un-American Activities investigations. He did collect some information but was otherwise preoccupied with his own duties on the Senate subcommittee. But he was accused of placing a spy on the Dies Committee, working specifically for Harold Weisberg.



He still calls this a "bullshit story." He is at a loss about its source. He said that they may have made it up. For the first time he was subjected to F.B.I. harassment. Agents held him for a long time in an office and refused to release him until he signed a statement admitting to monkeyshines with the Dies group. At the time, Harold was working closely with Gardner "Pat" Jackson, chief lobbyist for labor leader John L. Lewis and the latter's Non-Partisan League. Harold and Pat Jackson, held against their will by the F.B.I., were intended scapegoats for the Dies Inquisition.

"I refused," Harold recounted. "I told them, 'You're trying to put my ass in a sling. Give me a truthful statement, I'll sign it.' We walked out. All this was the important education I got after college."

To thwart an impending indictment against him, Harold scored an indictment against a Dies agent. Once Harold was served a subpoena, he moved three women with typewriters into the Office of the Clerk of the House of Representa-

tive. He worked for the Congress and knew the rules. He was entitled to copies of any expense account reports filed by Dies and his woolgatherers. With the help of a trio from the Congressional typing pool he squeezed out line items on every penny expended by the Dies Committee. He discovered payouts to a D.C. representative of William Dudley Pelley's fascist Silver Shirt Society. The Pelley agent was in Washington ostensibly as a witness before the Dies Committee but was really waiting in the wings to entrap Harold with false testimony. All the while, Dies was nurturing the Pelley man as an *agent provocateur* and sapper. The Silver Shirt copped a plea of uttering, forging and taking money under false pretenses. Martin Dies had little recourse but to fix it with the U.S. Attorney and personally make a pleading in the paid liar's behalf in court. Harold looks back and names his war against the Dies Committee as a hard, tough fight and maybe the roughest experience of his life.

"They were out to get me," he declared. "That was the only time I was ever before a grand jury. What they had done was pass a law to get me and Gardner Jackson. They made it a crime to interfere with what was called 'the proper functioning of a Congressional committee.' I hadn't done a damned thing to the Congressional committee. They had to hoke up something to lay a criminal charge. We had a fine international lawyer for the defense. This was the kind of rough-and-tumble he wasn't used to. I don't know whether he argued *ex post facto* law or not. Remember the Watergate hearings, when Lowell Weicker said he threw Charles Colson out of his office and told him he was in violation of the law? That's the law!"

Harold left Federal employment — just for a time. From 1939 till 1941 he was a free-lance writer. "I wrote anything I could think of," he said. "If you got a hundred an article you were doing fairly well." He knew how to hustle stories. Snap them on the fly or stake them out like a

detective. And he knew Washington and its bestiary, its scions and sycophants, its king-makers and bunkshooters and foils. He was in touch with the labor unions' best heads and fists. Seasoned Federal career people were friends, and resources. He had phone numbers for controversy on every matchbook cover in his pockets, tailored to fit a news-reporting industry in transition.

From 1941 until 1942 he was Washington correspondent for *Click*, the third largest picture magazine of that period (after *Life* and *Look*). He split time between Washington and New York, where he found a friend in I.F. Stone, then on the staff of the *New York Post*. *Click* was out to snare the Nazi business cartels operating in the U.S. for big profits under two flags. Harold worked on cartel investigations and invariably turned over his most urgent and damning information to the Department of Justice. His reportage on the cartels timed nicely with the Nazi-Soviet Pact. A prime Weisberg target was the I. G. Farben chemical combine in the northeastern U.S. Harold was constantly on its trail.

The place to start tracing a cartel was frequently the U.S. Patent Office. There, in the card files, Harold ran across many patent transfers to the Joint American Stock Company (JASCO). Which unraveled as the cozy arrangement of the Farben interests with Standard Oil plus the Synthetic Gas and Supply Corporation. Word whistled down press channels that Harold had hammered the story. He was in his office on Fifth Avenue in New York when an editor from a bright (but short-lived) new paper called *PM* phoned him with an offer to buy it. The deal was never closed, but Harold's reputation became the solid nemesis of Farben in the press.

When he learned of another Farben deal with Imperial Chemicals, his insider at Justice suggested that he feed the new information to British agents. Harold's contact at the British Embassy was a woman named Craig McGeachey, Informa-

tion Officer. She was the key to arranging his access to the European underground early in the war.

Harold admitted to me that he made improper use of classified information only once. In his cartel investigations, case data was leaked to him regarding Jan Bata, the shoe manufacturer from Czechoslovakia. Harold was most concerned about a shoe plant Bata was operating on the Chesapeake Bay. What couldn't be put aside was some evidence that Senator Millard E. Tydings (1890-1961), powerful anti-New Deal Democrat from Maryland, had suspicious dealings with the Czech shoe king. The Weisberg exposés in *Click* infuriated some of the well-heeled superpatriots and crypto-fascists who ran the Chicago banks. Those banks held title to the business debts of the Annenberg family, publishers of *Click* and other major magazines. The pursuers put on the squeeze. The Annenbergs decided, in light of newsprint shortages, to consolidate their assets on softer magazines like *Holiday* and *Seventeen*. So ended *Click*.

Harold returned to free-lancing. It should get softer, or easier anyhow, with a reputation and a track record. But it doesn't. You take your licks alongside the rest of the field hands of the Fifth Estate. The blows that smart most are shabby violations of dignity and confidence – *betrayals of trust*. I don't know how the self-censorship of the Annenbergs, and their summary execution of *Click*, must have imprinted the mettle of Harold Weisberg. But a similar incident occurred soon after. This time he swung back with a right cross.

He was free-lancing bits for a small magazine called *Picture Scope*. For one issue he ghost-wrote a piece for Henry Morgenthau, Jr., Secretary of the Treasury. The Post Office Department banned that number from the mails because of a cheesecake picture inside. "It would be very modest by today's standards," Harold said. "There was no nudity. I was able to get that rescinded. I didn't think anybody in the Administration wanted

the Postmaster General to say that Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau wrote for a lewd, lascivious magazine. I took care of it out of court just by talking to people in the Treasury, people in the Justice Department. I don't know if I spoke to anybody in the Post Office Department. A Legion of Decency type was Postmaster General then."

By this time the country was at war with the Axis. There were items needing closer attention than time and Selective Service would allow. On August 3, 1942, Harold married his sweetheart, Lillian Stone, an indexer with the Senate Munitions Committee and other investigative committees. Lil's family dates from before the American Revolution. Her ancestors fought on both sides of the War of Independence, and later, both flags of the Civil War. They were part of the original settlement that became the State of Maryland.

Just before Christmas, 1942, Harold was inducted into the U.S. Army. He outlined his military service for me: "In the 1930s I was a conscientious objector to compulsory military training. I wound up as a military policeman. The only time I did anything worthwhile was when I was protecting people who weren't drafted – from American soldiers. I was in Oswego, N.Y., Camp Shanks, N.Y., Fort Dix, N.J., Morristown, N.J. A whole bunch of us, 200, were in a labor battalion some place near Jersey City. Then I was at Camp Patrick Henry, Va. When I was at the Newport News port of embarkation, I was owed an overseas furlough and a weekend pass but couldn't get either. So I went over the hill. I came to Washington to see my wife, got the mumps and wound up in the hospital. That changed my whole career in the Army. The best thing that happened to me was getting the mumps."

In 1943, after his recuperation, the Army detailed him to the Office of Strategic Services (O.S.S.) in Washington – the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency. What he did then, he said, were all sorts

of strange things under the mantle of counterintelligence. A year later he was medically discharged from the Army and rehired as a civilian by the O.S.S. Once again he was detailed to Washington, but for a different kind of work. He told me that he was a troubleshooter. "All sorts of odd jobs were bounced to me," he said. The agency classified his position as a research analyst. His O.S.S. office was transferred to the State. Among his senior colleagues were a couple of O.S.S. men who were accomplished anthropologists. Harold's information was that they were protégés of Margaret Mead. She had, in effect, gotten them their jobs.

For a short while, Harold's boss was Willmoore Kendall (1909-1967), a renowned Yale scholar. One of the old boys from the faculty lounge whose writings apparently influenced the thinking behind a super-spy agency, Kendall figured among Harold's most unforgettable characters as the loudest man he ever heard in a government office and a "clod" who felt that right-wing propaganda was more important than impartial analysis. Harold's tenure at State and with O.S.S. was curtailed by the early rise of a new Red scare in the nation's capital. Its corrosive effect stifled careers and ruined lives for the next decade and more.

"I was fired by the State Department," he told me. "I was one of the ten early security cases. It was a real program. The only one who was not a Jew a case of mistaken identity. It was the beginning of a period when a lot of people whose views were not that far off from Hitler's thought they were the only patriots. Anybody who didn't agree with them was a Red. The exposés I'd published during the Nazi-Soviet Pact didn't make any difference. The others were all scholars and Ph.D.'s. That was about 1947, I guess. We were never organized to defend ourselves. I said, 'I'll make out, but where the hell are you guys going to get a job in a college?' Abe Fortas's law firm, Arnold, Fortas and Porter, represented us *pro bono*.



The only condition they made was, 'If you tell us a lie, we've lied.' The State Department rehired us, issued an apology, we all quit. That never happened again. I learned a lot from some of these experiences. I learned how to fight and never lie."

Harold and Lil retreated to their farm in Hyattstown, Maryland. Out against the mountains was a time and place to breathe and sleep in peace. Nobody with a writ or a lien on your good name or hard work or intuitions. They raised chickens and geese and sold them to patrons who were friends in the main. Harold found time to study waterfowl like a naturalist. He thought about writing about them, but so far has published nothing. The drive to investigate and to write need never be halted. But his priorities changed, at least for a pastoral sabbatical of some 15 years.

He had no personal knowledge or contact with John F. Kennedy before or during his White House years. Possibly the President had heard about him. The Weisberg farm be-

came a Saturday outing for Washington professionals and activists, seeking the sunshine and outdoors and fresh poultry. Between voracious newspaper reading and the verbal exchanges with customers, Harold learned a good deal about the New Frontier and such exciting programs as the Peace Corps. Somehow he wanted in on things. The Peace Corps looked like an "in".

Harold and Lil had several times made arrangements with the Frederick Civil Air Patrol to fly shipments of free goose eggs to Children's Hospital in Washington and Kernan Children's Hospital in Baltimore. The cargoes were so successful and well-publicized that possibilities seemed lively for something bigger. After some weekend coffee with friends in Georgetown, he hatched a plot to transport crates of live geese for use by the Peace Corps overseas. The organization left the planning and transportation mostly in the hands of Harold Weisberg. He called the program "Geese for Peace." He involved the community of Frederick in crating geese for shipment from his farm to Idlewild Airport in New York. When weather conditions prohibited the faithful service of the Civil Air Patrol to Idlewild, Harold called on a local trucking company to handle the job. They carried the birds at no charge. The first haul for the Peace Corps gave glowing public relations for the program and a good test of community support for the idea. "Geese for Peace" didn't last long. It was just one in a galaxy of good starts. And it was Harold's.

Now, at his house in the woods, he sits with his back to a picture window. Outside the heads of wild rabbits are visible. They stare back unafraid and unwary. Harold wears wide suspenders and tinted eyeglasses. His Slavic eyes are narrow and dark, his face somewhat florid. He still wears his hair in a crewcut, as in his reporter days. A thin mustache crests his gentle, bemused smile. The words keep coming. This man remembers almost everything. I suspect he knows more about the mechanics of assassina-



tion than any other living person. He made it his subject in 1963, when very different things were on his mind. That is, until the dreamer of the Peace Corps was shot dead in Dealey Plaza, Dallas.

In the fall of '63, Harold was liquidating his farm. He had made a handshake deal with Crown Publishers of New York for at least one book. Harold fully intended to devote all his time to writing a book about noise and its deleterious effects. His very first book would have been a forward-looking treatise on noise pollution. He would have condemned noise as Rachel Carson had damned pesticides. The clamor of Willmoore Kendall was doubtless throttling still between anvil and stirrup. Then came the gunshots.

Friday, November 23, 1963. Harold is in a hen house collecting eggs. On his belt is a transistor radio with a wire connecting and an earphone to it. Harold revels in good music, the kind he can hear on classical and easy listening stations. It salves his restlessness. But this afternoon he hears a UPI report that the President has been shot. He walks to his house and switches on his television set. He's magnetized to it for the next two days. Sunday morning, seven a.m.... Lil and Harold are still watching the ponderous drama on the screen. Harold says, 'You know, dear, this poor sonovabitch might be killed.' She doesn't know what he means. Why would Oswald be killed as well? 'Everything that's happened is making it impossible for him to be tried,' Harold says. 'That makes me suspect that somebody doesn't want him to be tried. And if somebody doesn't want him to be tried, the most obvious reason is, they don't want him to be able to talk. There's only one way to stop that.' And when Lee Harvey Oswald is gunned down, Harold follows everything reported on the air or in print: None of it makes sense. He swings over to his typewriter; once again he's a reporter. He raps out a legal summary of a book prospectus to his literary agent. The first sentence reads: *Lee Harvey Oswald could not*

*have been persona non grata to the F.B.I....*

His agent won't have any of it. Her retort is terse and even panky: "Look, nobody in New York will touch anything that isn't the official story. I don't dare ask them. I'll be ruined. You can stop by and get yourself another agent."

She wasn't kidding. Harold wrote a clever, incisive, intense critique of the Warren Commission Report and titled it *Whitewash*. Many publishers admired its workmanship and urgency. Non, however, would take it on. Irony seized the day. The late William Loeb, ultra-conservative editor and publisher of the Manchester, N.H. *Union Leader*, admired the manuscript and said he would promote it to book publisher Henry Regnery of Chicago. Regnery, also a respected conservative press, was interested in the book. Someone in Loeb's office was instructed to mail Harold's manuscript to the Chicago house. *Whitewash* was never received there. Weisberg has never been clear on what really happened to it. This wouldn't be the only disappearance of one of his book manuscripts at some post office in the Great Somewhere. This was just the first time.

Ultimately he paid out of pocket for the printing of *Whitewash* at Merkle Press in Washington. A limited run in the fall of 1965 justified broader dissemination in the spring and summer of '66. It warranted attention and won a lot. Not a single liberal book publisher had been willing to take risks with it. No agent would cut a deal. No newspaper or magazine would talk about serial rights.

But word gets around on Publisher's Row. This one was too hot, too explosive. Too damned dangerous.

Much of the world saw a squad of armed police moving the gaunt and battered Lee Harvey Oswald into a garage full of onlookers. One spectator was Jack Ruby, who blasted Oswald in the guts on live TV. It was the morning of November 24, 1963. The premonition of Harold Weisberg was sud-

denly a terrible fact. Terrorism was a word for the atrocities and outrages in foreign land where governments totter and laws don't obtain. On a Sunday morning we were shaken by its realities right here. It would fall to our leaders to sort it out and explain why and how an extraordinary President was killed, and why it was now unreasonable to feel safe. If the cops aren't on patrol to protect us, then just what is their mission? Those rangers with the heavy weapons and the radios and the space-age technology—what are they doing for us? Or to us? And what's the next move?

The mere existence of Lee Harvey Oswald remains a confusion to this day. He plunged himself like a junkie's needle into the consciousness of a startled nation. The prime suspect in a very public murder became the Gold Bug, the whirling scarab on a string. Or so Harold Weisberg saw him when he wrote his first critique of the Warren Commission Report. That first book—was *Whitewash*. From the outset its author calls the Kennedy murder the design of a criminal conspiracy. He further insists that Oswald was within the machinery of this conspiracy. But through six books on the Kennedy case, Weisberg contends that Lee Harvey Oswald never fired a shot at the President; was in fact such a poor marksman that he couldn't have done this particular murder; that his antique Italian rifle was not the murder weapon; that Oswald's physical presence in any location inside the Texas Book Depository from which he could have lethally aimed any weapon at the motorcade is utterly improbable. In six books and hundreds of pages, the writer will not move from this stance. He's so convincing that I don't believe Oswald did it, either. No way I could believe it now.

At the core of his first *Whitewash* volume is a chapter headed "The False Oswald," A masterpiece of analysis by the challenge-and-attack method, and firmly grounded in the Warren Commission's own findings. Evidence had piled up in Dallas and New Orleans to indicate

that the plotter(s) who killed Kennedy had skillfully booby-trapped the trail of blood with decoys, bum steers and sink holes. In the early weeks of the official investigation, the reported appearances, moves and erratic acts of a person named Lee Harvey Oswald defied common sense. Some held to the notion that there were indeed *two* men using that name in close proximity to the President's final itinerary. Federal investigators ultimately jettisoned this search and ruled out its usefulness. Weisberg pursued the traces as far as he could. He saw a pattern of deliberate and obvious confusion, a Mah Jong box of false leads calculated to hoodwink any attempt at detection. One "Oswald" double was apprehended and called an assassin. The other slipped out of sight, perhaps forever, but only after furnishing an alternate life-span for someone named Oswald. Different associations, other hangouts and ports of call, varying tempers and skills with firearms. The two Oswalds were alike in a compulsion for disorderly conduct where no one could miss seeing or hearing them. Both were likely murder suspects, but it's safe to doubt that either one is alive today.

Harold believes that the real Lee Oswald was a straw dog, a scarecrow for the murder of Kennedy. In his last hours at the Dallas lock-up, the bona fide Oswald swore to the police who pounded his face that he was a "patsy" and that unnamed parties would surface to clear him. None ever checked in to speak in time. If it's true that an Oswald double was unleashed in the Southern states just prior to the assassination, then any responsible detective would be boxing in the dark with a fearfully intricate and orchestrated conspiracy.

Harold's half-dozen paperbound volumes on the Kennedy assassination are fascinations to anyone with the diligence to give them. Another requirement is a passion for justice as fervent as Harold Weisberg's. All are compilations of evidence, stockpiles of supporting documents (most in facsimile) and intense com-



mentary, argument, challenge counter-charge, and angry accusation. All of his composition on the shooting from 1965 through 1976, is running exposé of what he cites as "malfeasance, misfeasance, and nonfeasance" on the part of the Federal establishment. From the start he condemns the Warren Commission as a sham and its *Report* as calculated whitewash. To his mind, it was imperative for some very powerful individuals to initiate an impermeable cover-up within minutes of John Kennedy's death – if not months before. He has published thick catalogues dense with print and photos to prove that the eminent jurists and statesmen who were commissioners never intended to investigate anything but the most surreptitious and expedient means to destroy palpable, material evidence. What couldn't reasonably be obliterated was squirreled away in secret or restricted places. Some critics have mocked and ridiculed these books for their bombastic and sometimes execrable prose. Harold has no doubt set the Executive, the De-

fense and the Justice power blocs down in malice. He collectively brands them as "malevolent" in their common approach to President Kennedy's assassination. He feels that they don't want answers to desperate questions – like, *who killed John F. Kennedy?* Harold Weisberg can write blisteringly good sentences about a betrayal of confidence and the protection of the laws. What he's telling his readers in those briny books is that truth is a shattered mirror, and the Lords of Misrule would prevent their unmasking and exposure by any ruse or chicanery or ritualistic outrage.

The most intriguing of his books is Harold's third, *Oswald in New Orleans* (N.Y.: Canyon Books, 1967). Subtitled *Case of Conspiracy with the CIA*, this is Weisberg's first major indictment of persons living and dead for the Kennedy killing. It also supplies a clear motive in Kennedy's murder (and possibly Oswald's and other's) for the first time. And he boldly implicates the Central Intelligence Agency, not only as a major platter against the life of a President, but as the prime source for those blunders and disgraces in foreign policy that mitigated genuine threats of murder. Harold wrote and documented an exciting book, maybe the best of the lot, full of first-hand information you won't find elsewhere. It's out of print today. Weisberg was the first critic of the Warren Commission Report to allege criminal conspiracy in a book, and two years later to link the CIA with that conspiracy. A number of later writers, mostly lawyers, have borrowed or snatched flames from the Weisberg brazier.

Harold was on location for this one, in steady touch with District Attorney Jim Garrison and a cast of characters from the nightmares of Dostoevsky, Gogol and Zola. Backing his discoveries with transcripts of F.B.I. reports – some of them as sophomoric as they are telling – and the Warren Commission Report, he leaves you no basis for dismissing those individuals as mere fictional grotesques. There was a David William Ferrie, also a Clay Shaw, also a

Dean Andrews and a Carlos Bringuier. Some of those were dead when Harold learned of them. Others died in the next seven years. Harold tracked the spoor of Lee Harvey Oswald in the captivating underground of New Orleans, in its boho French Quarter and in outskirts like Metairie, where Oswald lived for a time amidst Ku Klux Klanners (who are still in town). Skillfully, like a seasoned mystery writer, Harold follows Oswald in the queen city of the Delta. His portrait of Oswald is vivid and credible. You won't read it elsewhere, either.

Weisberg's rendering of Oswald is of a compulsive and impetuous rebel of 24 without real political conviction or solid sense of himself. He'd do anything for quick attention and headlines. Passing out pro-Castro leaflets in front of the prime mercantile center in New Orleans... Shambling into meetings of Cuban exiles and inciting fist fights with pro-Batista patriots... Hanging out in Cuban dives in the French Quarter just to get puking drunk on ersatz lemonade and South-of-the-Border hard stuff. You can picture him in cowboy bars on the bucking bronco if he'd lived 20 years later. Instead he argues, debates, rumbles with bad guys in the torrid night streets. This is the Oswald who convinced several expatriate Cubans that he was an *agent provocateur*, working to topple Castro. Other Cubans were led to believe that his allegiance was to Fidel and that he was seeking a visa to join him in Havana. This was the Oswald who had earlier sojourned in Moscow and married Marina, daughter of the KGB agent. He had colored and checkered his career from the time of his Marine Corps hitch when he was cleared for secret assignments. Proof was found for this. Harold intuits that Oswald, who was known by the F.B.I. and probably used as an informant, wanted most of all to be a secret agent. He was a man who could be manipulated by the CIA and the agency's front organizations among reactionary Cuban refugees. Harold believes that Oswald could have been on odd jobs for both the

CIA and the FBI. For this, check out his fifth book, *Whitewash IV* (self-published, 1974).

In the early part of *Oswald in New Orleans*, Harold declares, "Were any of this book to be printed in invisible ink, when the heat of exposure strikes it, the initials 'CIA' would appear." Toward the end he infers that the Warren Commission and its staff assisted the FBI in "whitewashing" the role of the CIA in the conspiracy to kill Kennedy. He further accuses the CIA of attempts to sabotage the independent investigation of District Attorney Garrison.

The Warren Commission concluded that the President was shot by only one gunman whose name was Lee Harvey Oswald. Commission staff and FBI investigators working for this body ruled out conspiracy. The Weisberg theory is that more than one assassin fired on President Kennedy, and that one or more of the conspirators had Kennedy in their sights from the grassy knoll near Dealey Plaza. Harold sees Oswald as the "pigeon", the fall guy who never got off a single round but took the rap, possibly by intent but very likely through CIA engineering.

Weisberg gives as a motive the hidden agendas of the CIA in the Caribbean and elsewhere, and John Kennedy's official orders to the agency to lay off Cuba after the abortive Bay of Pigs incursion in 1961. Kennedy expressly forbade any further CIA adventures for the sake of "freeing Cuba. But Harold was only one of many who collected clues to the secret maneuvers of the spook agency to retake Cuba as a trophy. The *modus operandi*, alleged by Weisberg and his contemporaries in the press, was to form and finance heavily secret societies of counter-revolutionaries in the Latin sectors of Miami, New Orleans, Dallas and other Southern points near the Gulf. Backing the Cuban exile groups were very rich and very bizarre figures deep in the criminal underworld of New Orleans. Among them were Dave Ferrie and Clay Shaw, both homosexual and both now dead, with their coteries of

goofy boyfriends - Cuban, Mexican and American. Ferrie uttered more than once that John Kennedy ought to be shot. He and Oswald and others cited by Weisberg were linked to a para-military training camp on Lake Ponchartrain near New Orleans. It was set in bayou country to ready a CIA-sponsored strike force against Cuba. The FBI raided the place and shut it down, not long before the Kennedy assassination.

In *Photographic Whitewash*, the fourth Weisberg volume, he continues his attack on the CIA. On page 143 he reproduces in facsimile a letter from J. Edgar Hoover to J. Lee Rankin, chief counsel for the Warren Commission. The date is December 4, 1964. Hoover was conveying a CIA request for a print of the Abraham Zapruder film of the Kennedy shooting. Hoover wrote that he was given to understand that the CIA wanted the grisly film "for training purposes." Twice Harold gets in his licks: "...Are we to assume the CIA is training presidential assassins or replacing the Secret Service?" "To train assassins? Or to teach them how not to get caught?"

Weisberg's last Kennedy book is *Post Mortem* (self-published, 1975), his thickest and heaviest. Therein he wraps up his angry exposure of what he sees as a widespread cover-up by the Warren Commission and those agencies he designates as "Federal police." It attests to a ten-year battle with the courts and the bureaucratic moguls to cut loose the autopsy report and ballistic evidence in the case. Not all, but an awful lot of it. In *Post Mortem* he summarizes the murder motive: "Thus a popular young President who had announced policies unwelcome to the most powerful vested interests and a determination to reform and control those forces of government that had been without control - notably, the CIA, which had ringed his nose and jerked him by the tender tissues - could be murdered and, as though the nuclear age of the 1960s was a returned medievalism, consigned to history with this dubious epitaph of a fake inquest."

His second book, *Whitewash II* (self-published, 1966), corrals the Secret Service inside the same holding pen with the legion of other federal culprits garbed as cops, soldiers, statesmen and career civil servants. Harold has it out for the Federal megalith in his very incendiary books. An old-time liberal thinker with the bleeding wounds and choking bitterness of a man turned misanthrope by abuse, ingratitude and slander? Maybe that's part of his own story.

Harold took a couple of years' sabbatical from the JFK case to investigate the shooting of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He could scarcely resist the impulse when Robert Kennedy was killed just weeks after. The country was taking on warlike face overseas. At home, our finest leaders and cherished heroes were felled by square-peg derelicts dismissed from the public conscience too simply and quickly as long nut murderers with guns. Weisberg could no more sit still for the new soft-pedal explanations of '68 than he could in '64. In 1971, the New York house of Outerbridge and Deinstfrey published Harold's *Frame-Up: The Martin Luther King - James Earl Ray Case*. Once again he supplied eager researchers and historians with superb documentation on the violent death of a public figure. His book is useful. You don't hear much about it because it tries the patience of an audience accustomed to reading Weisberg's colloquys about conspiracy. He's singing the blues to a familiar tune. James Earl Ray is accused and a fall guy for a political crime he didn't commit. We've got a plot out there, big and secret and jealous for power. James Earl Ray has been denied a trial by the clever machineries of that same power. And he's such a maddening liar that even the bar and the bench of Hell couldn't accommodate a single word of his yarn-spinning testimony. Too bad. We don't get much closer to solving Dr. King's murder in the ten years since the Stokes Committee looked at it again. If Harold Weisberg could only stay on the case, maybe we'd have new

answers. *Maybe*. His drawbacks in *Frame-Up* arise from too many darts at too many targets. Too many foes, too many straw dogs of his own. At the same time, winnowing through his list could be rash.

In his Kennedy books, Harold never pointed a finger at suspects unless those persons had already departed this life before he sat down at his typewriter. True to form, he only makes allusions and inferences in *Frame-Up* to individuals and organizations with the inclination and capabilities to gun down Dr. King. Which is to say, he mentions them in a particular context, and often. Harold's poison list can be compiled by any astute reader concerned with solving the crime. It covers an old boys' club of Southerners who used to be CIA functionaries and turned to law, politics or both; Cuban exiles who would have repeated the Bay of Pigs assault at the blast of a scoutmaster's whistle; several cabals of racist thugs using various Ku Klux Klan outposts in the South; and many well-heeled and durable political factions indentified for years on the ultra-extreme right. Back-country patriots with money, prestige, clout, guns, ammo and shooting ranges. Guys who give talks over creamed chicken and peas at motel seminars and sling lines like *motivated men make America*.

Casting a shadow across *Frame-Up* is the spectre of William Bradford Huie (1910-1986), best-selling novelist and magazine reporter. He made his mark with such novels as *The Revolt of Mamie Stover* (1951) and *Hiroshima Pilot* (1964). Truman Capote had just accomplished a literary coup with *In Cold Blood*, a true-life account of a murderer on death row in Kansas. Huie must have seen an even fatter cash-in with the assassin of Dr. King. He was permitted to visit James Earl Ray and struck a deal for his life story. In Harold's words in *Frame-Up*, "Huie bought Ray." He paid the accused thousands of dollars in a "buy-and-sell journalism" arrangement. Weisberg found it galling. But Ray was kited through a brief proceeding (Harold dubbed in a "minitrial") and has

been denied due process ever since. Huie got his series in *Look* magazine and a book *He Slew the Dreamer* (1970). His original title was *They Slew the Dreamer*, hinting at a conspiracy. But Ray kept changing his story and his defense counsel. The King case was a gold mine for lawyers and on-the-fly reporters, as long as Ray's imagination was fertile and in the slammer.

Harold Weisberg's pioneer investigations kicked down many doors for others in pursuit of truth about the John Kennedy assassination. There has been a staggering windfall of books - enough for an independent skeptics' and troublemakers' library. Some of these books are excellent. I recommend two in particular. Bernard Fensterwald, Jr. is a touch Washington attorney who represented Weisberg in some of his suits to liberate suppressed evidence in the Kennedy case. With assistance from some able colleagues, "Bud" Fensterwald wrote *Coincidence or Conspiracy?* (Zebra Books, 1977). This one is especially good for its montage of capsule biographies of the complete *dramatis personae* in the Kennedy case. Very recently, Conservatory Press has issued *High Treason*, subtitled *The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy: What Really Happened*. Its co-authors, Robert J. Groden and Harrison Edward Livingstone, give abundant credit to Harold Weisberg's breaththroughs. As does Fensterwald, throughout his own mammoth tome.

I asked Harold if he has plans for more books. He said that he'd like to proceed but couldn't without the help of bright assistants who know about his work. He can't afford to pay such help right now. But if he had reliable staff, and some restoration of his health, what book would he do next?

"I think the first one would be on the King case," he answered. "I have that book pretty wellwritten. I want to add to it what I got under the Freedom of Information Act. It would be a very big book. I have my personal investigation part written. Lil retyped the rough draft and

I've never read it. But I can't bring myself to write a book like that off the top of my head."

The lesson of history and literature is that savants and other heroes go to jail, get beaten or even murdered. Something in the heart and soul of Harold Weisberg cries out against this slaughter. I suspect it has to do with being born to freedom and then coming to know freedom's costs.

Harold played his old-time hunches on all the books. He went on site many times to investigate people and locations for his skepticism. The same savvy and *chutzpah* carried him through lawsuit after lawsuit in Federal court to salvage classified documents he sensed were pertinent to the JFK and Martin Luther King murders. His FoIA winnings are partly attributable to the skills of Washington lawyer James H. Lesar, who often represents those who might otherwise have trouble getting counsel.

"In 1974, a section of the Freedom of Information Act was amended by the Congress because of one of my suits that Jim handled," Harold explained. "We took it to the Supreme Court and we lost. Congress amended the Act and that's how we made the Freedom of Information Act as we know it today. Not a paper in the country carried it. The only time it's ever appeared in the paper is when Judge Gerhard Gesell made this one reference to it. That was the case I filed against the FBI to get the results of the ballistics testing of the assassination of John Kennedy."

Harold holds Gesell in lofty esteem, and for good cause. "I wish we had only judges like him in the country," he said. "Exemplary! Absolutely a great judge even though he was prejudiced against me one time. There's a tradition of great judges. He's a rarity today. There are a bunch of finks, bums, sycophants, ass-kissers and college-educated ignoramus. I've been before enough of them to speak about this. Some of those who have good instincts vacillate. They don't know from one day to the next what



they've said. You're supposed to go by what they've said. Some of them are in the pocket of the executive agencies, including the FBI."

From the early 1970s, Harold was visible in federal courts as the public citizen demanding the forbidden. He frustrated judges and government attorneys beyond their sense of decorum and the limits of good temper. His original suit to obtain the FBI report on spectrographic analysis of the bullets in the Kennedy shooting was heard before Judge John J. Sirica. The decision in that case was so questionable that it set the stage for a Congressional overhaul of the Freedom of Information Act.

"On Freedom of Information, Sirica doesn't know the law and doesn't care about it, either," Harold remarked. "Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert M. Werdig got up when I had the case before Judge Sirica and said, 'Your honor, the Attorney General found that it's not in the

national interest to disclose these records.' Well, the Act is specific in legislative history in saying that 'the national interest' was a traditional excuse which had no merit and almost always was invalid. It was wrong under the Act. Therefore, Sirica ruled on it."

Robert Werdig was a foe of Harold's in more than one litigation. Harold contends that Werdig lied regularly and that it was not accidental. In another FoIA suit, Werdig flashed a memo to attorney Jeffrey Axelrad of the Justice Department's Civil Division. On the sheet is boldly printed: HERE'S HAROLD, AGAIN. That memo is framed and hangs on a wall at the Weisberg house.

Harold has been jacked around plenty in his life by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He never met J. Edgar Hoover and never thought the bad treatment was Hoover's fault. All the same, Harold holds the FBI responsible for a systematic cover-up of the real evidence in the Kennedy assassination. I asked him if he believes the FBI to be a criminal organization. He was unwilling to go so far but said that the FBI was responsible for some of the worst crimes in the country.

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To Harold Weisberg I expressed my chagrin about 25 years of mania, in my generation and those after, for the lore of intelligence, covert action, official secrets, electronic security, espionage and the élan of spies. Young professionals hunger for it. The resonance of the so-called "secret war" is palpable now. And I see it beckoning for a sick and sinister climate of assassinations.

"I agree," he said. "I think there's something strange in young people beginning that way. I don't think there's anything strange in *becoming* that way in the course of your work and the course of learning things. But it says that when they begin, they want to live a novel. I was never a spook. I was an analyst." □