

BEAT THE DEVIL.

In Defense of the Warren Commission

In mid-February, for the benefit of television viewers in Australia, I found myself squaring off on the subject of *JFK* against Fletcher Prouty and Carl Oglesby. Perched on a stool beside me in a Los Angeles studio was Wesley J. Liebeler, a 60-year-old professor of law at U.C.L.A. Originally from North Dakota and conservative/libertarian in political outlook, Liebeler was one of the staff counsels on the Warren Commission. Later, in a week when *JFK* got eight Academy Award nominations, and when Richard Heffner, a Rutgers professor who is also chairman of the motion picture industry's film rating system, announced in the *Los Angeles Times* that *JFK* marked the end of the Gutenberg era and the dawn of a new way of telling history, I drove up to Zuma Beach and interviewed Liebeler.

AC: *What about the speed at which Oswald would have had to fire his Mannlicher-Carcano? Critics of the Warren Commission say Oswald could never have loosed off the shots in so short a time.*

WJL: The clock for the whole thing is the Zapruder film, which runs at 18.3 frames a second. The film shows only two shots striking the people in the car. A time fix on the first shot can't be precise, for reasons I'll come back to. But the time of impact of the second shot that struck is precise. That was at frames 312-313 of the Zapruder film. At frame 313 the head just explodes. So either at 312 or 313, which is practically the same instant. And that's the last shot for which there is any evidence of anything in the car being struck.

The first shot hit, in the view of the Warren Commission, between frames 210 and 225. The commission came to that conclusion based on the Zapruder film, which shows that at a certain point Kennedy was reacting to a shot. He raises his hands up. During part of that time the limousine is behind a road sign, so it can't be seen for about .9 of a second. So you can't tell how long before the reaction the shot actually struck.

The House Assassination Committee (1978) said the first shot struck around frame 190, which is a little sooner, about a second. So to establish the time frame the Warren Commission subtracted either 210 or 225 from 312, and divided that by 18.3. Let's say 210. This gives us 5.6 seconds. Take 313 and subtract 225, and divide that by 18.3 and that gives 4.8 seconds. So the commission said that the time lapse between the first shot that hit and the second shot that hit was between 4.8 and 5.6 seconds.

If we assume that three shots were fired, you have the question of which shot missed. The House committee concluded that the first shot missed. The Warren Commission never decided on the matter. The evidence is consistent with the proposition that the first shot missed. If so, all Oswald had to do was fire one more shot. So in fact he would have had from 4.8 to 5.6 seconds to fire one shot, not three shots.

AC: *So, on that explication, he's waiting with his gun aimed. The car comes along, he shoots and misses. But there's no time fix as to when he might have fired that shot. It wasn't*

in the famous 4.8 to 5.6 second interval. He reloads and then fires the shot that hits the President in the neck between frames 210 or 225 according to the Warren Commission, or 190 according to the House committee.

WJL: Right. Now he has to reload (which takes a minimum of 2.3 seconds), work the bolt once and fire the third shot that's fired (the second shot that strikes). And he has, according to the Warren Commission, 4.8 to 5.6 seconds. That is even time enough to fire twice, which he would have had to do if the second shot missed. If, as the House committee said, the first shot that hit was fired at frame 190, then Oswald had 6.72 seconds to fire either one or two shots. That is 313 minus 190, divided by 18.3. There was enough time.

You know, people harp on about the Warren Commission, which is fine. But the House Assassination Committee confirmed every single finding that the Warren Commission made—every one, except on the conspiracy question.

AC: *Well, what about that?*

WJL: The only evidence for conspiracy that the House committee had was a Dictabelt tape that recorded police radio transmissions. That was discovered long after the event in a file cabinet in the Dallas Police Department. There were two different radio frequencies that the Dallas Police Department used to transmit messages back and forth among the police. Both those frequencies were separately recorded. The Warren Commission didn't know anything about this evidence. When you listen to the Dictabelt there's no sound of shots at all. But the House committee took this Dictabelt and gave it to an audio consulting firm in Boston that did an analysis and found some pulses. The Dictabelt had been recording from a motorcycle somewhere that had its microphone stuck open. The consultants claimed they could distinguish four different pulse phenomena, three of which could be made to correspond to the shots we've just talked about, if you pushed the first shot back to frame 190. And there was a fourth pulse. So the consultants went down to Dealey Plaza, set up microphones, fired off rifles and established what they called an audio footprint, and said initially that there was a 50-50 probability of a shot fired from the grassy knoll. This was in September of 1978. Then in December, right before the House committee closed up shop on the hearings, the audio consulting firm came up with a 95 percent probability on this same shot. So on the basis of that evidence the 1978 House committee concluded there was probably a conspiracy, that there was a guy on the grassy knoll shooting, though he didn't hit anybody. Robert Blakey, the committee's chief counsel, then gave the Dictabelt to the Justice Department to be analyzed further. Later he wrote a letter to *National Review* saying that if the Justice Department's investigation of the tape didn't bear out the 95 percent probability of another shot, he'd retract the whole conspiracy theory.

Well, the Justice Department turned all this over to a panel of acoustic experts set up by the National Research Council. They figured out that sounds on both Dictabelts could be matched, and since the one had a time reference, they could

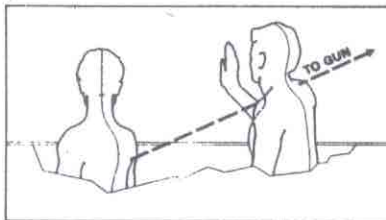
ALEXANDER COCKBURN

fix the time frame on the other Dictabelt as well. The N.R.C. acoustic committee then concluded that the sounds on the second Dictabelt were recorded more than a minute after the assassination occurred. So they didn't have anything to do with the shots in Dealey Plaza.

AC: *The other thing that seems to cause people a lot of problems is the "single-bullet theory"—the first shot that hit Kennedy and also John Connally.*

WJL: The first shot that hit went through the top of Kennedy's back, came through the throat to the right of his trachea, didn't hit any bones. Governor Connally was struck right below the right armpit in the back. The bullet went down through his chest cavity, came out just below his right nipple, struck him on the back side of his right wrist at the joint, broke the wrist and came out the front of his wrist and entered his thigh, making a very shallow hole.

The pathology panel of the House committee and also the Warren Commission concluded that the damage to Connally was done by one bullet. Work it backwards. If his hand was on his thigh, which is consistent with the Zapruder film, you know that the bullet wasn't going very fast when it came out the underside of the wrist, which has implications about how fast it was going when it entered the wrist. If it had already gone through Connally's chest cavity and the President's neck it had been slowed down. A wounds ballistic expert testifying to the House committee established that there's a range of velocity within which a bullet will break a bone without hurting the bullet, provided it's not going too fast.



Warren Commission Exhibit 399 is the so-called "magic" or "pristine" bullet. It is neither one. It is in good shape, but eight of the nine forensic pathologists on the House committee medical panel agreed that it had gone through the President's neck or upper back and then inflicted all of Connally's wounds. Ask yourself where the bullet went after it came out of the President's neck if it didn't hit Connally. After coursing downward through the President's body, where it hit no bone to deflect it, either it's got to hit Connally, who is sitting right in front of him, or it's got to hit the car. It didn't hit the car.

The Warren Commission did a re-enactment of the assassination which showed that the President and Governor were located in a way that the bullet would have gone directly from the exit wound in the President's neck into Connally's back. The House committee used a different method of calculating the trajectory and unequivocally confirmed the Warren Commission findings that one bullet—CE 399—did go through the President and inflict the Governor's wounds. The House committee said flatly that the trajectory it established supported the single-bullet theory.

Oliver Stone's treatment of this question is simply a lie, and he knows it. The House committee confirmed the Warren Commission's findings on this point without qualification. But with the conspiracy Stone has fabricated, the addition of the House of Representatives won't cause any further problems. He's got half the country in on it now.

I have challenged him to debate the validity of the Warren Report. Naturally he issued a press release saying he'd be happy to do it, but he never responded to me. He's engaged in scholarship by press release. I repeat my challenge.

AC: *In the Zapruder film, at frame 313, when the second bullet strikes, Kennedy's head jerks back convulsively, and people have reckoned this implies a shot from the front.*

WJL: If you look at Kennedy's head, right at frame 313, just as the bullet strikes it, it doesn't move backward. It moves slightly to the left and downward, just for two or three frames, which is consistent with a bullet striking it from behind and nowhere else, because the momentum of the bullet is imparted instantly.

Then shortly after frames 312-313 the President's body goes backward. The House committee said there are two explanations. One is the jet effect, caused by the skull and brain exiting and forcing the head back and to the left. Combined with that effect, the committee said, was a neuromuscular reaction. The medical evidence is the best way to determine the direction of the shots that hit the President. Take the skull. The entry wound in the back of his head is "coned" on the inside of the skull. What can be constructed of the exit wound from the skull is coned on the outside. The House medical panel all agreed to these conclusions, and also that the wound on the President's upper right back could only be an entrance wound. Eight of the nine pathologists on that panel concluded that the President was struck by two *and only two* shots. The medical evidence excludes the possibility that the President was struck by a shot fired from any direction other than behind him.

AC: *Why didn't the Warren Commission have access to the autopsy photographs and X-rays?*

WJL: Warren didn't want to press Bobby Kennedy, who controlled them, for their release. The worst consequence was the idea that someone was trying to hide something. Without these materials the autopsy surgeons described to the commission their recollection of the wounds, and their medical artist drew the diagrams showing the entrance wounds in the wrong place.

AC: *What happened to Kennedy's brain?*

WJL: The brain was under Robert Kennedy's control when it disappeared. It is widely believed that he destroyed it. He was afraid that these materials might end up on public display.

AC: *Do you think the Warren Report was flawed?*

WJL: It was too oracular, overwritten. Also I think it relied
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challenged by "She could lose the baby and die, right?" There would be a miniseries romance between the shy, handsome construction worker and the beautiful, abandoned housewife. (Don't ask me. It never fails.) "He can build them a house after." "But what if, ya know, one of them can't make babies." "He'll do it with the doctor but he'll always love her the best." The priest and the farmer would be last pick, the odds favoring the farmer. The artist, the historian and the schoolboy would be left to the bombs. They always were.

The discussion was engrossing. The meaning of survival was everyday reality to these young people. They knew more than necessary about life and death, violent death, random death, unfair death, youthful death. Even Heriberto's sauntering late entrance didn't interrupt the flow of passionate opinion and advocacy. I called time for the first vote. Ten votes each for the doctor and the general; odds and ends for the construction worker, the housewife, the pregnant woman, the farmer and the priest. One vote for the historian.

Heriberto! Some in the group laughed. Others, including me, were annoyed. Come on, Heriberto. It's been a long day. Grow up. But Heriberto wasn't playing. He seemed genuinely astonished that his was the only vote for the historian. His reasons? "Because." Nidia, a formidable young woman, took the floor to tell him that she had no time for nonsense (she didn't use the word "nonsense"), that the vote had to be unanimous, that the next vote would be the last vote and that he'd better vote the right way. Another poll and again, one vote for the historian.

We could hear other groups breaking up and going toward the lunchroom for the last meeting of the day. One of the girls—I don't remember her name—was tearful. She had to be at her supermarket job by 5, and she wanted her fair chance at this summer job. She looked my way for backup but, fortunately, I kept my mouth shut as Heriberto began to explain his choice. The historian has to survive, he said. Someone must keep a record of what happens in the world. Someone has to write it all down so that people will know what happened before them. If it isn't written down, it will be forgotten and that would be terrible and wrong. People's lives must never be forgotten.

That isn't exactly what he said, but it's close. He had no golden tongue; he stumbled, mumbled, cleared his throat and repeated himself. It took a while to disconnect Heriberto of the potato chips from this earnest young man trying to persuade us that remembrance is an obligation and slowly, slowly, we understood. At a quarter to 4, just a little behind schedule, the historian got into the shelter.

This is a true story, so it doesn't end with Heriberto's triumphant address to the final assembly and greater glory to come. It was Nidia who represented the group and she was terrific, relishing the moment and gracefully crediting Heriberto with the substance of the case for the historian. Sometime during the crush of goodbyes, Heriberto told Sheila, the principal, that he hadn't come for the job, only to hang out with his friends, and that he wouldn't be around that summer. He drifted away and I don't know what happened to him. I do, however, remember him clearly and so, following his instruction, I wrote it all down so that you can remember him too. □

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too heavily on eyewitness testimony. The problem is that people will testify to damn near anything. So the commission had one eyewitness testifying that he saw Oswald sticking a rifle through the sixth-floor window—

AC: But there was another witness next to him who saw Oswald and another man beside him.

WJL: Right. That's the problem. The only way you can avoid that is to look at evidence that can be replicated. Evidence that is here today, will be here tomorrow and 100 years from now: the autopsy photographs; the autopsy X-rays; the ballistics tests. The bullet that was found on the stretcher was fired from Oswald's rifle to the exclusion of all other rifles; the two big fragments in the car were fired from that rifle to the exclusion of all other rifles; that rifle was on the sixth floor of the School Book Depository; it had Oswald's print on it; there was a brown paper bag there that had Oswald's palm print on it; it was a long bag that would have held a rifle. At this point it would be nice to have an eyewitness who said that when he gave Oswald a ride to work that morning he had the bag with him, and there was one. But fine, never mind how the bag got there. We know it was Oswald's rifle because he rented a post office box and his handwriting is on the application; he ordered the rifle and his handwriting is on the paper he ordered the rifle with; he wrote out a money order and his handwriting is on that; and the rifle was sent to his post office box. There are a number of pictures of Oswald with a rifle. The House Assassination Committee, with improved enhancement techniques that the Warren Commission didn't have, was able to prove it was the same rifle. The negative was found and it had been taken from Oswald's camera to the exclusion of all other cameras. George de Mohrenschildt had a copy of that picture with Oswald's handwriting on the back. There's no evidence of tampering on the negative; the scratch marks are the same. The picture was taken six months before the assassination. We have photographic evidence, like the Zapruder film. On the Tippit shooting, we've got forensic evidence that shows clearly Tippit was killed by bullets from the gun Oswald was carrying when he was arrested. So you can make out a pretty good case just on the basis of the physical evidence.

Why did Oswald kill the President? The man was a malcontent, not happy, not stupid by any stretch of the imagination, but unhappy and discontented. I guess your typical liberal [laughs]. Not that. I guess he would have as much contempt for liberals as you or I. He was a revolutionary of one form or another. I drafted a psychological profile of Oswald for chapter seven of the report. It was reviewed by a panel including the chief of psychiatry at the Mayo Clinic, who threw my draft down and said, "This is very interesting stuff, but it tells me a lot more about you, Liebel, than it does about Oswald." So how the hell do I know why Oswald killed the President?



EXCHANGE.

Jousting After Camelot

THE SWORD AND THE STONE

New York City

I'm afraid my friend Alexander Cockburn has missed the main point of Oliver Stone's *JFK* ["Beat the Devil," Jan. 6/13]. As co-screenwriter of the film, I can assure Alexander that its intent was not to transform John Kennedy into a white knight who single-handedly would have ended the cold war had he lived. Rather, it was to show that the economic, military and intelligence institutions committed to fanatical anticommunism were far more powerful than any elected official and would stop at nothing to continue their enormously profitable cold war crusade.

Historians differ on whether Kennedy would have pulled out of Vietnam, continued limited assistance or escalated the war by committing massive numbers of U.S. combat troops. Cockburn and others argue that Kennedy was elected as a cold warrior, built up the military, made a number of hawkish public statements defending U.S. involvement in Vietnam and thus could have been expected to do just what Lyndon Johnson did later.

That position, while largely accurate about Kennedy's early years in office, ignores crucial evidence. As John Newman shows in his book *JFK and Vietnam*, Kennedy turned down numerous requests from his advisers and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to send troops to either Laos or Vietnam. While Cockburn may dismiss as "political opportunism" Kennedy's private statements to Senators Mike Mansfield and Wayne Morse, as well as to aide Kenneth O'Donnell, that he intended to withdraw all U.S. advisers from Vietnam after the 1964 elections, it is more difficult to dismiss National Security Action Memorandum 263. Signed by Kennedy on October 11, 1963, it unequivocally ordered the withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. advisers by the end of 1963. The existence of that memorandum is fact. The speculation is that Kennedy might not have carried out the order had he lived.

Cockburn quotes part of NSAM 273, signed by Lyndon Johnson four days after Kennedy's assassination, and says it contained no change in policy from a draft written before the assassination. This interpretation neglects entirely paragraph 7 of that document, which gave the go-ahead for U.S. forces to develop covert military operations against North Vietnam. In the early draft, such operations were to be carried out by "Government of Vietnam resources." The distinction is important because it was such covert operations by U.S. Navy ships that led to the Tonkin Gulf incident, which in turn opened the door for U.S. troops to be sent en masse to Vietnam.

JFK presents the hypothesis that Kennedy was assassinated because those institutional forces with a vested interest in the cold

war perceived him as a threat. Allen Dulles, Gen. Charles Cabell and Richard Bissell, all fired from the highest echelons of the C.I.A., felt Kennedy had betrayed them at the Bay of Pigs by refusing to provide air cover. Cuban exiles and right-wing mercenaries trained by the C.I.A. under Operation Mongoose for a second invasion of Cuba were enraged at Kennedy for ordering their training camps raided and all their weapons and ammunition confiscated in the summer of 1963. (The head of Operation Mongoose, Gen. Edward Lansdale, had spent much of his career conducting black operations in Southeast Asia and had lobbied for the ambassadorship to Vietnam, but Kennedy rejected him.)

The Joint Chiefs and others in the Pentagon felt Kennedy had caved in to the Communists in October 1962 by reaching, over their objections, a secret agreement with Khrushchev not to invade Cuba in exchange for withdrawal of Soviet missiles from the island. Kennedy had also signed a nuclear test ban treaty with the Russians in the summer of 1963, again over the objections of the Joint Chiefs. And he had initiated back-channel overtures to Fidel Castro to try to normalize relations with Cuba—a process that was under way, according to Castro, when Kennedy was killed.

All this had the Pentagon and the intelligence community in an uproar. Cockburn and others on the left may view Kennedy as just another cold warrior, but *JFK* makes the case that the right saw him as an appeaser of Communism and had him executed for that reason. It is possible to acknowledge Kennedy's cold war history and at the same time believe he had changed enough—or talked about change enough—to be perceived as a genuine threat to war profiteers on the right.

Finally, Alexander's idea that "the psychic bloodlines of *JFK*" may be traced to Ellen Ray's "Catholic girlhood in Massachusetts, with an icon of J.F.K. on the wall" is amusing but makes about as much sense as the notion that Cockburn's view on *JFK* may be traced to his own childhood surrounded by icons of Stalin. Has Alexander forgotten that Ellen was raised in Nebraska and that her father was an unapologetic atheist?

Zachary Sklar

THE QUEST FOR THE GRAIL

Berkeley, Calif.

Orwell once made a remark to the effect that only an intellectual could say something so stupid. I was reminded of it reading Alexander Cockburn's efforts to use the undoubted fictions in Oliver Stone's *JFK* as a pretext for denying two of its incontrovertible facts: that in late 1963 Kennedy had authorized an initial withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. troops from Vietnam, and that, in a high-level meeting right

after Kennedy's murder, Johnson redirected U.S. Vietnam policy from this graduated disengagement to graduated escalation.

Cockburn suggests that my "fantasizing" about Vietnam is in Oliver Stone's movie because of John Newman's *JFK and Vietnam*, which "first came into the offices of Sheridan Square Press . . . whence it was passed on to Stone, who assisted in its dispatch to Warner Books (part of the conglomerate backing *JFK*), which is publishing the book in February." But the fantasizing here is Cockburn's. Newman, a professional historian, sent his book first to Warner, which signed a contract for it in April 1991. Stone never saw the manuscript until August. The book will gain a large and respectful readership—not because of corporate linkages, or someone's Catholic girlhood, but because it meticulously documents allegations I could make only tentatively twenty years ago in an article. That article absolutely did not assert, as Cockburn implies, "that J.F.K. would have pulled the United States out of Vietnam."

What Kennedy would or would not have done, had he lived, is of course speculation. But his policies at the time of his death are a matter of record, a strenuously suppressed record, to be sure, but a record I was able to reconstruct deductively from the "Pentagon Papers." The most cowardly feature of Cockburn's essay is his decision to attack my tentative reconstruction from limited evidence in 1971 rather than from Newman's massive documentation of the same basic case today. That argument included the following propositions:

1) Kennedy planned, over the most vigorous dissent of his Joint Chiefs, "to withdraw 1000 U.S. military personnel [from Vietnam] by the end of 1963." This withdrawal was in accordance with a more long-range program to train Vietnamese, making it "possible to withdraw the bulk of U.S. personnel . . . by the end of 1965."

This language did not come from antiwar Senators Mike Mansfield and Wayne Morse, as Cockburn asserts. This language is taken from the Top Secret Military Recommendations to the President by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and Gen. Maxwell Taylor on October 2, 1963. The "presently prepared plans" to withdraw 1,000 troops, which they then recommended announcing, had in fact been approved at a conference the preceding May.

2) In NSAM 263 of October 11, Kennedy secretly approved the McNamara-Taylor recommendation "to announce in the very near future" withdrawing 1,000 troops, "as an initial step in a long-term program to replace U.S. personnel." He directed then "that no formal announcement be made of the implementation" of these plans, but in November the secrecy was lifted, with the President suggesting that the details would come from a top-level Honolulu conference on November 20. *The New York Times* published the an-

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nouncement on November 21, one day before the assassination in Dallas.

3) Two days after the assassination, Johnson and his top advisers (all Kennedy holdovers) approved a new policy statement, finalized as NSAM 273 of November 26. With respect to the 1,000 men, the text was highly ambiguous, if not deliberately misleading. It implied continuity with previous objectives of withdrawing troops (as had been announced publicly on October 2) but failed to reaffirm NSAM 263, which had implemented the plan to withdraw them.

Here is the language: "The objectives of the United States with respect to the withdrawal of U.S. military personnel remain as stated in the White House statement of October 2, 1963." Of course the objectives remained the same: No one wanted the U.S. troops to fight there forever. But the implementation of troop withdrawal, an implementation so controversial that to this day many people deny and lie about it, had been replaced by the earlier objectives and nothing more.

4) Let us now turn to the key policy innovation of Johnson's NSAM 273, that the United States would begin carrying the war north. For the first time in any presidential directive, NSAM 273 authorized prompt planning for "different" (i.e., escalating) levels of U.S. activity against North Vietnam, up to and including bombing. These operations, which led to the August 1964 Tonkin Gulf incident, had in fact been discussed for some time inside the Pentagon but had never before been presented for presidential authorization.

5) There has been a flood of cover-up and lying about this policy innovation by L.B.J. In the secret "Pentagon Papers" an account of NSAM 273 claimed that it "revalidated the planned phased withdrawal of U.S. forces announced publicly . . . limited cross-border operations to an area 50 kilometers inside Laos. . . . No new programs were proposed or endorsed." This Pentagon lie is virtually repeated by Cockburn when he assures *Nation* readers that "there was . . . no change in policy." The secret summary of another of the "Pentagon Papers" stated categorically that "the U.S. did effect a 1,000 man withdrawal in December 1963," but the paper being summarized had also just as categorically denied this.

Recent controversy has revived the lying. Although both NSAMs were declassified in the 1970s, the obfuscation of the record in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*—and now *The Nation*—continues. George Lardner wrote in the *Post* last July that NSAM 273 "ordered the withdrawal [of 1,000 troops] to be carried out." (It didn't.) Michael Specter in the *Times* is longer, and worse: NSAM 273 "continued Kennedy's policies, and historians have shown that it was drafted the day before Kennedy journeyed to Dallas." But on

November 21, the day in question, Kennedy was in Texas and never saw the draft prepared for his signature. He may of course have heard it over the telephone. But the draft spoke only of additional resources for activities against North Vietnam by the Saigon government. NSAM 273 deleted this restriction and sanctioned the plans for U.S. operations that began shortly thereafter. This alone is proof of the change in policy that occurred under L.B.J. on November 24.

Of the three obfuscations, Cockburn's is the longest, and the worst. Dipping deep into my article, he quotes extensively not from my argument but from NSAM 273 and an earlier Kennedy-era statement of October 2, 1963. He suggests, quite falsely, that I merely compared the two, laying "enormous weight upon minute textual alterations" and "signaling these with urgent italic." But it was three texts, not two, I was comparing, in three parallel columns. And the point of the italic was to show that in 1963, as earlier in 1961, Kennedy had refused to make the final commitment to an overriding objective—"to win"—that Johnson made so swiftly in NSAM 273. In other words, Cockburn makes my three-part sandwich look beefless by himself removing the beef. Despite the space he devotes to trashing me, only one of my sentences is quoted, and that one to misrepresent it.

No one can deny that Kennedy was a hawk, at least until the shock of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. But after that crisis he explored new and more conciliatory policies in the Caribbean as well as Vietnam. Here Cockburn is totally unreliable. How can he claim that Kennedy "never entertained the idea of a settlement as advocated by [Ambassador] J.K. Galbraith"? Galbraith's idea was for a quid pro quo based on a *phased American withdrawal* (my urgent italic), precisely what Kennedy set in motion in 1962 and then implemented with NSAM 263. And how can he blame Kennedy for the 1963 coups in Guatemala and the Dominican Republic? Kennedy refused to recognize the military juntas that took over there and in Honduras—another policy that was swiftly reversed by Johnson. Thomas Mann, the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico who had been deeply involved in the Guatemala coup, had announced in mid-1963 that he would retire; instead, Johnson promoted him to preside over the new policy of encouraging coups in Latin America, like the one in Brazil in 1964.

I cannot prove that Kennedy, had he lived, could have pursued these policy divergences to any different outcome. But in 1963 there were both bureaucratic and corporate pressures for him to do so. To say this may be an affront to those single-minded foundationalist Marxists who talk, like Cockburn, of "the open secrets and agendas of American capitalism." The fact remains that in late 1963 a worsening balance of payments forced Presidents to choose between defending the dollar and security for overseas investment. Kennedy was inclined to the former before Johnson chose the latter.

Those familiar with my research into deep politics (unacknowledged political processes) and parapolitics (the exploitation of these, as in the C.I.A.-Mafia connection) will appreciate how consistently such research is resisted by the establishment left (*The Nation*) in almost the same terms as the establishment center (the *Times*). Both consistently deny that covert forces can influence politics as well as implement them. Both thus illustrate the hyperstructuralism of "power systems" analysis, which anti-foundationalists see linking Talcott Parsons to Michel Foucault. The center writes out of false optimism, the left out of false despair. But both write out of false consciousness, to rationalize their disempowerment.

The result is a shared resistance to new facts, like those about the assassination, to which their hyperstructuralism cannot give meaning. (One thinks of the Nicaraguan Communists who, like their opponents from the center and right, joined the UNO coalition to resist the Sandinistas.) And increasingly, as we have just seen, a shared distortion and repression of other facts, such as the documented Vietnam policy change.

Peter Dale Scott

MORTE D'ARTHUR

Washington

My friend Alexander Cockburn has no tolerance for those who wish to uncover homicidal conspiracies like the Kennedy assassination. He says there are more important things to worry about. He never actually denies there was a conspiracy to kill the President; he just thinks U.S. foreign policy would have remained pretty much the same had John Kennedy lived or died, for J.F.K. was an anticommunist cold warrior, committed to counterinsurgency and military interventionism. Therefore, how he died is a matter of no great moment.

Alexander argues from a structuralist position, to wit: When we try to reduce great developments of history to the hidden machinations of conspiracy, "out the window goes any sensible analysis of institutions, economic trends and pressures, continuities in corporate and class interest and all the other elements . . . of American capitalism." How true. Yet this does not mean we can discount the role of human agency in history. The great "continuities in corporate and class interest" do not happen of themselves like reified, disembodied social forces. The function of state leaders is to act as willful and conscious agents in re-creating the conditions of politico-economic dominance. They may not always get the results they want, but they do so often enough.

To achieve their goals they will resort to every form of mass manipulation and every means of force and violence—even against one of their own whom they have come to see as a liability. Thus, specific acts of assassination—be they by death squads in El Salvador or hit squads in Dealey Plaza—cannot be treated as exclusive of, or in competition with, the existence of broader systemic forces. They

are part of what keeps those forces in control.

While the larger structural trends may set the outer limits of policy or exert strong pressures on leaders, this does not mean that all important policy is predetermined. Short of betraying fundamental class interests, different leaders can pursue different courses, the effects of which are not inconsequential to the lives of millions of people. Thus, it was not foreordained that the B-52 carpet bombing of Cambodia and Laos conducted by Nixon would have happened if Kennedy, or even Johnson or Humphrey, had been President. It was not foreordained by the imperatives of global capitalism that the United States invade Panama or heartlessly slaughter Iraqis. If Alexander thinks these things make no difference in the long run, he had better not tell that to the millions of Cambodians, Laotians, Salvadorans, Iraqis and others who still grieve for their shattered lives and lands.

John Kennedy was himself something of an assassin. He probably ordered the murder of Diem, a class cohort who had become a serious liability. He plotted attempts on Fidel Castro, a class enemy. But Kennedy also did withdraw 1,000 troops from Vietnam. He did have serious conflicts with the C.I.A. He did close the armed C.I.A. camps that were readying for a second Bay of Pigs. He did give Khrushchev a guarantee he would not invade Cuba. He did, in his American University speech, call for a re-examination of U.S. attitudes toward the Soviet Union. He was unwilling to intervene in Laos and instead negotiated a cease-fire and coalition government—which the C.I.A. refused to honor, preferring to back a right-wing militarist faction that continued the war.

Kennedy was seen by the national security establishment as a danger. Right-wingers referred to him as "that delinquent in the White House." That Alexander doesn't see him that way does not mean the C.I.A. shared his view. In any case, even if Kennedy was a total C.I.A. tool, the fact that the President can be assassinated with impunity by elements in the national security state raises grave questions about the security of us all. It is a momentous crime that should be uncovered. Exposing such crimes is an important part of democratic fightback, an important part of our struggle to delegitimize the national security state. This is why Oliver Stone's *JFK* does a great service.

Michael Parenti

COCKBURN REPLIES

Los Angeles

The main point of *JFK*, writes one of the co-authors of its script, Zachary Sklar, was to demonstrate the existence of institutions more powerful than any elected official. The main point of my column was that J.F.K. always acted within the terms of those institutions and that, against the script's assertions, there is no evidence to the contrary. The film is premised on a lie. By its standards of analysis the "national security state" should have murdered L.B.J. during the 1964 presidential

campaign on the ground that Barry Goldwater was more in tune with its interests, and should similarly have assassinated Ronald Reagan after the Reykjavik summit, where he nearly gave Gorbachev the store while lauding Lenin (for which enthusiasm he was sharply reproved by *The Washington Post*).

Both Sklar and Peter Dale Scott invoke John Newman's recent book *JFK and Vietnam* to buttress the thesis that whereas J.F.K. was committed to withdrawal from Vietnam, L.B.J. reversed this posture within days of the assassination in Dallas. Newman's work is a stew of muddled chronologies and unproven assertions that Kennedy was a closet dove seeking to maneuver around the superhawks, like Gen. Maxwell Taylor. Aside from some conversations recollected by men such as Kennedy's political operative Kenny O'Donnell or Senators Wayne Morse and Mike Mansfield, Newman offers nothing to back up his claim that J.F.K. nourished, little more than a year after the start of his presidency, a plan for disengagement. Meanwhile, Newman has to deal with J.F.K.'s numerous statements to the contrary.

There were plenty of those. Mid-July 1963, as quoted in J.F.K.'s *Presidential Papers*: "In my opinion, for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam, but Southeast Asia, so we are going to stay there." September 9, 1963, to David Brinkley: "What I am concerned about is that Americans will get impatient and say because they don't like events in Southeast Asia, or they don't like the government in Saigon, that we should withdraw. That only makes it easy for the Communists. I think we should stay." The public record shows J.F.K. was always hawkish. With a willful credulity akin to religious mania, Newman insists that J.F.K. was dissembling, concealing his private thoughts, throwing the hawks off track. Out of such data-free surmises he constructs his fairy tale. The evidence he assembles to underpin these false surmises proves exactly the opposite of his thesis.

What in fact was going on during this phase of the Vietnam War is not complicated. As Scott concedes in his letter, the famous 1,000-man withdrawal was proposed by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and General Taylor (though Scott seems to find nothing odd about the fact that the "strenuously suppressed record" of J.F.K.'s pacific strategy originated in part with superhawk Taylor) because, buoyed by euphoric reports from the field, at that time they thought the war was going according to plan and victory was in sight. There were also domestic political reasons for the adoption of such a course. But a qualifier was always there. Withdrawal of advisers could begin, "providing things go well," to quote one Pentagon official. Take J.F.K.'s answer in a May 22, 1963, press conference: "We are hopeful that the situation in Vietnam would permit some withdrawal in any case by the end of the year, but we can't possibly make that judgment at the present

time. There is a long hard struggle to go." The minutes to the discussion of NSAM 263 have J.F.K. saying the same thing: "The action [withdrawal of 1,000 men] should be carried out routinely as part of our general posture of withdrawing people when they are no longer needed." And in implementing the withdrawal order, J.F.K. directed that "no further reductions in U.S. strength would be made until the requirements of the 1964 [military] campaign were clear." Remember that already by the end of 1961 J.F.K. had made the decisive initial commitment to military intervention, and that a covert campaign of terror and sabotage against the North was similarly launched under his aegis.

In his letter and also in his 1972 essay Scott makes a big point of contrasting J.F.K.'s supposed reluctance to articulate an overriding military "objective" in Vietnam against L.B.J.'s endorsement (in the opening paragraph of NSAM 273, signed on November 26, 1963) of the "win" posture as soon as he assumed the presidency. This distinction is pure philological fakery. On November 13, 1963, *The New York Times* published an interview with Michael Forrestal, a senior member of J.F.K.'s National Security Council, in which he said, "It would be folly . . . at the present time" to pursue "a negotiated settlement . . . between North and South Vietnam." J.F.K. himself, in a November 14 press conference addressing the situation in the wake of the Diem coup and discussing the upcoming Honolulu summit on Vietnam policy, said: "We do have a new situation there, and a new government, we hope, an increased effort in the war." He added, "Now, that is our object, to bring Americans home, permit the South Vietnamese to maintain themselves as a free and independent country, and permit democratic forces within the country to operate—which they can of course, much more freely when the assault from the inside, and which is manipulated from the North, is ended. So the purpose of the meeting in Honolulu is how to pursue these objectives."

Thus, J.F.K. was defining victory—to be followed by withdrawal of U.S. "advisers"—as ending the internal Communist assault in the South, itself manipulated from the North. Scott charges me with misrepresenting his argument that this posture can be sharply distinguished from the aggressive formulation in the opening statements of NSAM 273. I'm afraid that it is Scott who is being less than forthright with the historical data. In January 1991 the November 21 draft of NSAM 273, as drawn up by J.F.K.'s special assistant for national security affairs, McGeorge Bundy, was declassified. It is cited by Scott's hero, Newman, in a book Scott has endorsed for its "massive documentation" and therefore has presumably read.

As Newman acknowledges, the upshot of the Honolulu meeting was that for "the first time" the "shocking deterioration of the war" was presented in detail to those assembled along with a plan to widen the war, while the

1,000-man withdrawal was turned into a meaningless paper drill." The next day, back in the White House, Bundy put the grim conclusions of the meeting into the draft language of NSAM 237, which, as he told Newman in 1991, he "tried to bring . . . in line with the words that Kennedy might want to say." Here is the first paragraph, which Newman says "reiterated the essence of Kennedy's policy":

It remains the central object of the United States in South Vietnam to assist the people and Government of that country to win *their* contest against the externally directed and supported Communist conspiracy. The test of all decisions and U.S. actions in this area should be the effectiveness of their contributions to this purpose. (11/21/63)

Compare that with what Scott argues is the radical shift of NSAM 273 as finalized five days later under L.B.J.:

It remains the *central objective* of the United States in South Vietnam to assist the people and Government of that country to *win* their contest against the externally *directed* and supported communist conspiracy. *The test of all U.S. decisions and actions in this area should be the effectiveness of their contributions to this purpose.* (11/26/63)

The italics in the first version are added by Newman, and in the second by Scott. They furnish an amusing example of two men trying to tilt, in different directions, virtually identical words. So Scott's whole edifice collapses, helped on its way by the words of the speech J.F.K. was to have delivered at the Dallas Trade Mart on November 22: "Our assistance to these nations can be painful, risky and costly, as is true in Southeast Asia today. But we dare not weary of the task."

There is no beef either in the famous paragraph 7 of NSAM 273, which in the fantasies of Scott and Newman and Sklar is crucial, and which runs in toto as follows: "Planning should include different levels of possible increased activity, and in each instance there should be estimates of such factors as: A. Resulting damage to North Vietnam; B. The plausibility of denial; C. Possible North Vietnamese retaliation; D. Other international reaction. Plans should be submitted promptly for approval by higher authority." If this paragraph had been drafted on November 20 instead of November 24, Scott, Newman and the others would be excitedly italicizing "*possible increased activity*" as evidence that J.F.K. was avoiding concrete military commitment.

J.F.K. in the last days of his Administration, and L.B.J. in the first days of his, defined victory in the same terms, and both were under similar illusions. As L.B.J. recalled, looking back on his first presidential session on Vietnam on November 24, 1963, "Most of the advisers agreed that we could begin withdrawing some of our advisers by the end of the year and a majority of them by the end of 1965." To conflate such a position with

what Galbraith was urging is ridiculous.

What with all his heavy breathing about "deep politics" and "parapolitics," Scott either doesn't know or care very much about the actual, accessible historical record. To start with, he should read more Latin American history. J.F.K. most certainly can be blamed for the coups in Guatemala and the Dominican Republic. To take the latter: J.F.K.'s officials prevented Juan Bosch from mobilizing popular support, the only way a military coup could have been averted. They blocked land reform and obstructed his attempts to build a strong labor movement. They also refused to let him bring the armed forces under loyal leadership. In November of 1962, U.S. Ambassador John Bartlow Martin pressed the Dominican ruling council to harass and beat opposition figures. Robert Kennedy sent detectives to teach the art of riot control. In 1963, in Ambassador Martin's words about Bosch, the U.S. Embassy decided to "let him go." J.F.K.'s State Department recognized and supported the coup makers after a brief interval. In 1965, L.B.J. repeated J.F.K.'s achievement in nullifying the pro-constitutionalist threat. There was no "new policy" of L.B.J., encouraging coups in countries like Brazil. In 1962 R.F.K. went to Brasilia expressly to lecture President João Goulart on Brazil's "disturbing drift to the left," meaning proposed land reform. Military assistance and supplies of riot control equipment were remitted to the security forces in increasing amounts. C.I.A. slush funds were distributed to right-wingers, and in that same year the prime U.S. adviser to the eventual coup makers, Gen. Vernon Walters, transferred from Rome to Rio as military attaché. Walters later recollected that at the time of his transfer he was told that President Kennedy would not be averse to Goulart's overthrow. Perhaps this is all too "foundationalist" for Scott.

So far as corporate and bureaucratic pressures are concerned, Wall Street didn't turn against Vietnam until 1968, following the mini-recession of 1966-67 and the Tet offensive. All in all, Scott reminds me of an amateur paleontologist scrambling off the fossil heap with the jaw of a dog, which he clamorously misidentifies as irrefutable proof of the missing link. His self-serving characterizations of the "establishment left" strike me as silly, also as evidence of a rather pathetic persecution mania. First he shouts for attention; then he says I was unfair for citing him rather than Newman. Scott has done some interesting work (e.g., on the Indonesian coup of 1965), but his foolish performance here is indicative of how J.F.K. addles intellectuals. Incidentally, in the "what if" department, one can easily argue that J.F.K., confident of having the liberals on his side, would have escalated harder and quicker than L.B.J., who had no such confidence in liberal support.

Michael Parenti is fighting a straw man. I never discounted the role of human agency, any more than did those who in 1968 thought Richard Nixon more likely to get the United

States out of Vietnam than Hubert Humphrey, a highly tenable position. Would Bill Clinton or Paul Tsongas be "better" for Cuba in 1993 than George Bush? Maybe. Would Bush be "better" for the Palestinians? Possibly. There are, nonetheless, tendencies in U.S. capitalism, reflected in the policies of the elites, that have been demonstrably bad for Cuba and for Palestinians, whatever individual has been inhabiting the White House. Kennedy never challenged those tendencies or ran athwart them. (It was L.B.J. who ended Operation Mongoose.)

"Even if Kennedy was a total C.I.A. tool," Parenti concludes, "the fact that the President can be assassinated with impunity by elements in the national security state raises grave questions about the security of us all." Many of those writing to *The Nation* to abuse me apropos *JFK* made the same claim. But it isn't "a fact." It's a supposition, and even assuming the supposition were true, how was Parenti's safety placed in grave question? In politico/military/national security terms, probably the greatest threat to Parenti's safety came when J.F.K. brought the world to the brink of destruction during the Cuban missile crisis.

There's no 'golden key' rendering the overall system transparent.

JFK teeters between fascism and liberalism. In the idiom of the former, Stone has Garrison speak of the betrayed and slain "father-leader" whose children we are and whose revenge must be consummated before America can be free. On the liberal side of the ledger, Stone constantly promotes the idea, both in *JFK* and in other pronouncements, that J.F.K. was a good President, would have pulled out of Vietnam, made peace with Castro, caused the lion to lie down with the lamb.

Stone tries to have things both ways. He maintains that *JFK* is all true until someone demonstrates forcibly that it isn't. Then he tilts the other way and claims he is trying to construct an alternative myth. We should leave this "alternative myth" talk to the deconstruction industry. Myth making is a two-edged sword. Disraeli promoted a Jews-run-the-world theory; not so many years later the authors of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* happily expanded on the theme. The wizardry of the film lab, which can produce a grainy news film of L.B.J. making deals with the masterminds of J.F.K.'s assassination—part of Stone's mythic truth—can also produce Arafat urging Sirhan to kill R.F.K. Every artist deals in myth, but anyone arguing for Stone's manipulation of history should be aware of the morally tricky terrain and of the downside of myth making.

There's no "golden key" (e.g., the "truth" about the Kennedy assassination; "proof" that George Bush flew to Paris on October 20, 1980) that will suddenly render the overall system transparent and vulnerable. People who look for golden keys are akin to those poor souls who thought the future could be decoded by measurements in the Great Pyramid.

A couple of house-cleaning points. The passing of Newman's book to Warner via Ellen Ray, Bill Schaap and Oliver Stone was something mentioned to me by Zack Sklar in the same phone conversation I had with him in Los Angeles, when I called him to get the exact words of Kevin Costner's Hamlet speech. Zack very decently looked up the script and dictated the passage to me, adding amid my reproaches for his role in formulating such revolting sentiments that it had been Stone's work alone. It turns out that Stone lifted the passage almost intact from Carl Oglesby's afterword to Jim Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins*. And I'm sorry to have said Ellen Ray started the whole cycle on account of a Catholic girlhood in Massachusetts. I thought it was true when I wrote it, and didn't think it a particularly low blow. Frankly I was and remain baffled by the spectacle of the editors of *Covert Action Information Bulletin* and *Lies of Our Times* promoting false history and bad politics.

Parenti says the left should support Oliver Stone and his *JFK* because the film does a "great service" in the delegitimation of a national security state that exterminated a leader who dared entertain critical views about such a state. This is core bunkum. What "great service" is being done here? The answer offered by one letter writer was that "*JFK* is one of the most important films of our time because Stone is literally causing millions of people to think [his italics], to wonder and ask questions. As a bonus, perhaps they will go to the polling booths in November to demand answers." But people are being asked to think about something that isn't true, so they'll be asking the wrong questions and thus getting useless answers. The effect of *JFK* is to make people think that America is a good country that produced a good President killed by bad elites who also nearly destroyed the good investigator of the crime. This is an infantile, inactivist prescription for politics, essentially inviting people to put their faith in another good President, whose inevitable foul-up can then be blamed on the same bad elites. In New Hampshire in mid-February, Daniel Patrick Moynihan stood in Nashua, citing it as J.F.K.'s first campaign stop in 1960, quoting J.F.K.'s call for "a new generation to lead this nation" and adding in praise of the candidate standing next to him, "John Kennedy was right then and Bob Kerrey is right today." This is the answer people leaving *JFK* and searching for answers in the polling booths will get. For the left in 1992, trying to figure out how to foster the mass movements of tomorrow, *JFK* offers nothing but another dose of lies about the past. *Alexander Cockburn*

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