

JFK Conspiracy: Myth vs.

By Joel Achenbach
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Why hasn't JFK's assassination been solved once and for all?

JFK's murder never will be solved. Sorry! In 100 years they'll still be rehashing it, with ever more complicated and Byzantine conspiracy theories. They still will be arguing about the trajectory of the bullets, the nature of the wounds, and the significance of tiny shapes in grainy snapshots. The argument never can end because we never can know everything about a given moment in time, even one that lasted only about six seconds.

We reached this sad conclusion after seeing Oliver Stone's "JFK," a film with roughly as much historical veracity as your average episode of "Lost in Space." It made us wonder: Why is there a seemingly permanent gap between the official history of the assassination and the various unofficial, populist versions? Between the simple lone-nut hypothesis and the foreboding vision of dark, unseen conspirators?

Our best guess: Official history (Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone) is based on what we do know, while unofficial history (Kennedy was killed in a conspiracy) is based on what we *don't* know—on contradictions, ambiguities, mysteries.

Evidence is stuff like this: The gun, the bullets, the bullet holes in the clothing, the autopsy photos and X-rays, the eyewitnesses who saw Oswald etc. This evidence indicates that Oswald shot Kennedy. This evidence, in a less sensational murder, probably would send a man to his death in the electric chair.

Evidence is not stuff like this: HEY, CHUMP, HOW COME THAT BULLET DID ALL THAT ZIGZAGGING? HUH? HOW COME?

That is not evidence. That is a question, wrapped around a mystery, inside an enigma.

The evidence points to a CIA-FBI-CBS Triumvirate in Complicity with Cuban and Mafia elements linked to rogue Illuminati working in Tandem with the PGA



If you choose to believe in conspiracy theories, you have a wide assortment to choose from. Be judicious. A modest choice would be to believe that Oswald was in someone's hire; there is certainly evidence that people were plotting against Kennedy and there is nothing in the physical evidence of Dealey Plaza to contradict that kind of limited conspiracy.

But you are taking a bigger risk to believe, as "JFK" and most conspiracy books have it, that there was another gunman. There is no solid evidence of such a second (or third or fourth) gunman. What there is—and this is the core of most conspiracy theories—is information that's inexplicable. Or suggestive. Stuff that's *fishy*.

Like, the brain disappeared after the autopsy! Doesn't that mean something? Maybe. But while a brain itself is surely evidence, the fact that a brain is missing isn't necessarily evidence of anything.

Conspiracy theorists exploit doubt. Like, how could Oswald have fired three shots from a bolt-action rifle in merely 5.6 seconds, the interval between Kennedy's wounds? One possible answer: "Eas-

ily." The gun requires about 2.3 seconds between shots. Figure it out. Boom, reload, boom, reload, boom. You need 4.6 seconds. Amazingly, this is still cited as evidence of a conspiracy.

Then there's the "single-bullet theory," another doubt-sower. The Warren Commission said there was "persuasive evidence" that a single bullet caused the nonfatal neck wound to Kennedy and the wounds to Gov. John Connally. But the Zapruder film seems to contradict the idea, and Connally says he was hit by a separate shot. What does this mean? Maybe it means that the single-bullet theory is wrong. But the flimsiness of the official theory is not itself *evidence* of a second gunman. Pony up an actual name, an actual gun, an actual bullet, an actual eyewitness, then we'll talk.

You might ask, what about the evidence of a gunshot from the grassy knoll? The fact is, a small minority of the people at Dealey Plaza heard a shot from that location. And, darn the luck, no one saw that gunman fire. No shell casings were found. And if an invisible gunman did manage to fire a bullet from his invisible gun, the bullet remained invisible too—it vanished in thin air.

But what do you know, someone who looked a lot like Lee Harvey Oswald was actually seen firing a rifle out a window on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository. Police immediately put out a description of the gunman, and shortly thereafter police officer J.D. Tippit was slain when he stopped a man who matched the specifics. The Tippit killer was seen by six witnesses as he fled into a theater. The police converged and arrested the man—Oswald, who, lo and behold, was an employee of the Texas School Book Depository, and already was being sought for having suddenly disappeared after the shooting.

This is the pattern: Sounds and

the Facts

shadows on one side, warm bodies and physical evidence on the other.

"Oswald's fingerprint is on the stock of the gun. I like those things. And that's what juries like too, by the way," says Ron Wright, a Fort Lauderdale medical examiner who weighs evidence for a living.

The Kennedy murder is fishy through and through: Why was the autopsy botched? Why were there two caskets? Who were the three tramps? Why did that man have an umbrella on a cloudless day? Is that a man with a badge over there on the grassy knoll? Why did a cop honk twice outside Oswald's boardinghouse? Why don't the shadows look right on that photo of Oswald? And so on. Whether you think this adds up to a conspiracy depends on your tolerance for fishiness. But some of us die-hard skeptics don't crave a reality that is neat, clean and odorless.

The thing about conspiracy theories is, they can't be disproved. For one thing, the proof that there's no conspiracy is, by definition, a manufactured artifact of the conspiracy itself.

For example, "JFK" shows one

Plus revelations that Oliver Stone secretly directed "BIG TOP PEEWEE" under orders of the Right wing of the Trilateral Commission raises suspicions of a murder-suicide pact between JFK and Marilyn Monroe



fiend pressing a rifle against Oswald's dead hand, for a fake palm print. The movie shows another fiend planting the "magic bullet" on a stretcher. Scary stuff! Except both scenes are entirely invented.

There is one item of real "evidence" for a second gunman: the acoustic analysis of a policeman's tape recording. A number of experts say it shows, with great probability, that three shots were fired from Oswald's perch and a fourth shot (that missed) from the grassy knoll. From this one piece of evidence, the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded in 1979 that Kennedy probably was killed as the result of a conspiracy. But a subsequent panel of experts disagreed with the acoustic analysis. Who's right? Who knows. In the meantime, that's a small nail upon which to hang a multiple-gunman (much less "triangulation of gunfire") scenario.

Okay, so what about the Zapruder film? Doesn't it show Kennedy's head violently jerking back and to the left? Yes. But that's merely a layman's idea of evidence.

"The concept that a body goes in the direction that a bullet is going is a Hollywood concept," says Michael Baden, who served as chairman of the Forensic Pathology Panel for the House assassinations committee.

In fact, it doesn't matter why Kennedy jerked backward: Unmentioned by Stone is that Baden and his colleagues examined the X-rays and autopsy photos and concluded, with one dissent, that Kennedy was shot from the rear. (Ah, but we forget: David Lifton's "Best Evidence" argues that this is because some mysterious person surgically altered the corpse immediately after the assassination.)

"The whole thing is silly," says Baden. "When you look at the hard evidence, the scientific evidence, everything fits with Oswald being the lone killer."

The silliness of "JFK" is that it is probably 180 degrees wrong. The movie argues that our government (the FBI, the CIA, the Justice Department, the Secret Service, the Pentagon, the Dallas Police Department etc.) is so diabolically brilliant, so brutally efficient, that it could

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BY RICHARD THOMPSON FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

perpetrate an assassination of the president, rearrange evidence and plant a plausible cover story, then cover up the crime for three decades.

The truth is that our government is inept, boneheaded and bumbling—and conspires to delude the public into thinking otherwise.

The Mailbag:

Julia Finkel, a 9-year-old in Silver Spring, asks, "Why isn't W pronounced double-V?"

Dear Julia: What you've discovered is an ancient tradition. The letters V and U have a long history of being interchangeable. Go to an old government building, like a post office, and you might see Roman lettering on the facade using a V instead of a U (for example, "JVSTICE"). The "V" in ancient times was multipurpose. It could be used as both a consonant and a vowel. Meanwhile, there was no letter that connoted the "W" sound. In Old English, scribes used two U's side by side. Eventually they ligatured the two letters, and the "double-U" was born.

The question, really, is why the Norman scribes of the 11th century then reverted to the Roman letter V instead of U, turning the double-U into a double-V. Probably this was an attempt to be more pompously Romanesque. Just like the people who built those old post offices. The French have the best solution: They call it "double-V."