

Did J.F.K. Really Commit Suicide?

Of course not, but it's about the only theory that doesn't turn up in a fusillade of best-selling books on the assassination

By DAVID ELLIS

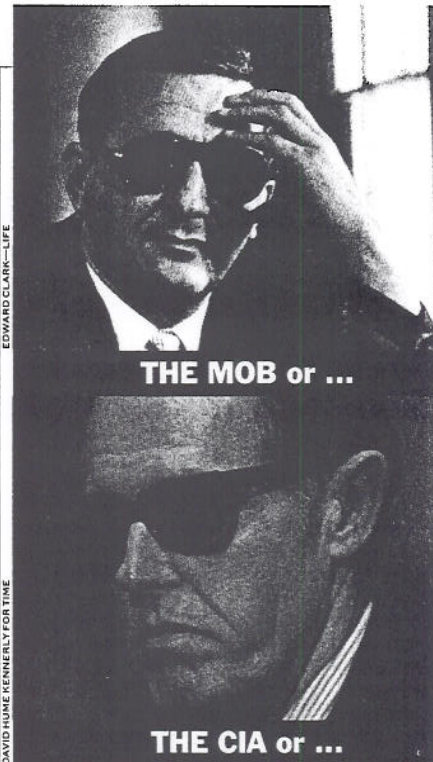
So you think America has lost its creative edge, that its citizens can no longer devise innovative solutions to what ails the country and the world? Well, stroll through your local bookstore and think again: no fewer than seven new books on the Kennedy assassination have recently been published. Several have made it to the best-seller lists, where they joined two paperbacks: *On the Trail of the Assassins* by Jim Garrison and *Crossfire* by Jim Marrs, both of which inspired Oliver Stone's film *JFK*.

The latest addition to the shelf is *JFK: Conspiracy of Silence* (Signet; 205 pages; \$4.99 paper) by Charles A. Crenshaw. It is the first account written by a doctor who was part of the Parkland Memorial Hospital trauma team that tried to save Kennedy and, two days later, his assassin (sorry, alleged assassin), Lee Harvey Oswald.

Crenshaw says that until now, he and his colleagues refused to "rock the boat" by publicly disputing the Warren Com-

mission's finding that Oswald was the lone assassin. But he is adamant that the head wound suffered by the President came from the front of the motorcade, thus making it impossible for Oswald to have murdered Kennedy from a sixth-floor rear perch. The physician says it is clear that "someone had tampered with the body" during its extralegal transfer from Texas to the autopsy room at Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland, presumably to support a single-gunman scenario. The injuries shown on autopsy photos, Crenshaw says, "are not the same wounds I saw at Parkland."

That theory isn't new, but Crenshaw's account contains a vivid anecdote that will no doubt be seized upon by those who argue that there was a government conspiracy. When Oswald, shot by Jack Ruby, wound up at Parkland, Crenshaw noted the presence of a heavyset armed man in the operating room. Moments later came a telephone call from Washington. On the other end of the line, according to Crenshaw, was Lyndon Johnson, who demand-



ed that the medical team obtain "a deathbed confession from the accused assassin," to be recorded by the mysterious agent. When Oswald died minutes later, the man disappeared.

In *The Texas Connection* (Texas Connection Co.; 323 pages; \$21.95), Craig I. Zirbel claims to provide the "final answer" on Johnson's role. Zirbel says Johnson probably organized the murder with a group of right-wing oilmen as a shortcut to the Oval Office. The author provides

If Kennedy Had Lived

By WALTER ISAACSON

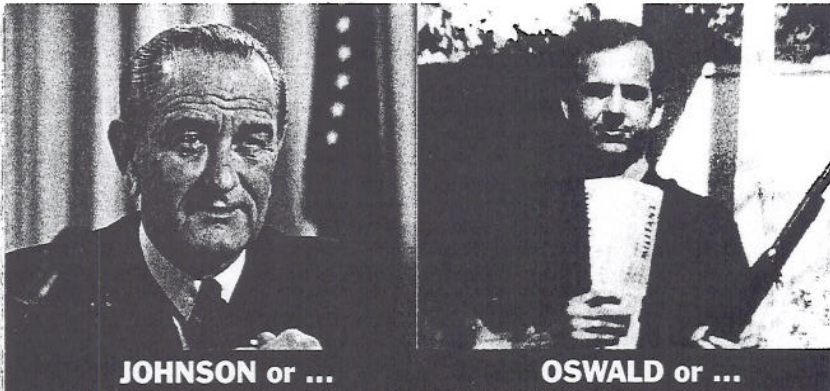
"What if . . .?" For historians the question can be a great parlor game, launching all-night arguments over what would have happened if, say, Hitler had got the Bomb or Pickett had not charged at Gettysburg. Nowadays one of the hottest questions involves speculating about what John Kennedy would have done in Vietnam had he not been killed in November 1963.

John M. Newman, a former U.S. Army major who teaches history at the University of Maryland, has entered this fray with a meticulously documented argument that Kennedy planned to withdraw from Vietnam had he been re-elected in 1964. Earnest yet overheated, grounded in footnotes yet prone to flights of conspiratorial conjecture, *JFK and Vietnam* (Warner Books; 506 pages; \$22.95) reads like a strange hybrid between a doctoral dissertation and the rough draft of an Oliver Stone screenplay, and with reason: it was, indeed, Newman's dissertation, and Stone did use it as a basis for his movie *JFK*.

The U.S. military, Newman argues, provided overly optimis-

tic battlefield assessments after American advisers were sent to Vietnam in the early 1960s. These were designed to encourage Kennedy to continue America's commitment there. Newman contends that Kennedy eventually became aware of this deception, but he went along because it served his own secret purpose: to withdraw some of the U.S. advisers under the guise that the war was going so well that they were no longer necessary. The "elaborate deception," Newman writes, "was originally designed to forestall Kennedy from a precipitous withdrawal, but he was now using it—judo style—to justify just that."

Newman shores up his thesis with citations from newly declassified documents. He is particularly impressive in detailing the evolution of a national security action memo—NSAM 263—that Kennedy signed in October 1963, ordering the withdrawal of 1,000 of the 16,000 or so American advisers in Vietnam. Newman also documents the subtle changes in policy that occurred after Kennedy was shot less than two months later. The 1,000-man withdrawal went ahead, but instead of full units departing, it "was turned into a meaningless paper drill" by counting indi-



JOHNSON or ...

OSWALD or ...



THE SECRET SERVICE ... KILLED KENNEDY

A Mob hit, a betrayal, a crazed zealot or a tragic accident—readers can chose from many scenarios. Among those in the conspiracy theorists' lineup: crime boss Sam Giancana, L.B.J., the "lone assassin," E. Howard Hunt and a nervous Secret Service agent.

no persuasive evidence to support the allegation, relying instead on the argument that Johnson was a murderer because he had the turpitude to behave like one. Zirbel ticks off Johnson's egomania, drinking habits and philandering as examples of his "violations of moral rules." The author dismisses opposing speculations of why Kennedy was killed, saying the Mafia did not participate in the assassination because "for a hit to have been made against the President, [Chicago Mob

boss] Sam Giancana would have had to consent."

Surprise. *Double Cross* (Warner Books; 366 pages; \$22.95), written by Giancana's brother Chuck and godson Sam, says that is exactly what happened. Chuck Giancana played the role of underworld Candide, charting his brother's rise as the most powerful Mob boss west of the Mississippi and taking note of his snuff work for the CIA. "It's beautiful," says Sam. "The Outfit even has

the same enemies as the government."

But the government soon became the enemy. Although Giancana boasted that he fixed votes, funneled thousands into the 1960 Democratic campaign and picked up girlfriend Judith Campbell from J.F.K., the Kennedys forgot their debts to the Mob. In 1961 New Orleans crime boss Carlos Marcello was deported in Robert Kennedy's crackdown on organized crime. An outraged Giancana began monitoring the private lives of both brothers. Along the way, the book says, Marilyn Monroe was murdered in a Mafia attempt to blow the lid off her affair with R.F.K. When that didn't play out, Giancana spent a year planning the assassination, which was carried out by a loose association of professional killers. According to the book, Oswald was a former spy sacrificed by anti-Kennedy elements in the CIA to take the fall. Then Ruby, Giancana's "Dallas representative," dispatched Oswald. The CIA turns up in Mark Lane's *Plausible Denial* (Thunder's Mouth Press; 393 pages; \$22.95), which claims Watergate burglar E. Howard Hunt played a key role in killing J.F.K., who intended to disband the spy agency.

For readers who want just a little spice added to the Oswald-did-it scenario, there is Bonar Menninger's *Mortal Error* (St. Martin's Press; 361 pages; \$23.95). According to Howard Donahue, a Baltimore ballistics expert, Kennedy was killed by a Secret Service agent in the presidential motorcade who accidentally discharged his AR-15 rifle. But Donahue says that Kennedy probably would have died anyway from the neck wound inflicted by Oswald. Among those unconvinced by this scenario is Menninger's publisher, who added a 17-page disclaimer to the book. ■

vidual soldiers who were due for rotation. In addition, four days after taking office, Lyndon Johnson signed a new memo—NSAM 273—that Newman shows was subtly but significantly different from the version Kennedy had been contemplating: among other things, it allowed U.S. involvement in covert actions against North Vietnam.

Newman's thesis would have been both powerful and persuasive had he stuck to the facts he uncovered in the documents. Instead he indulges in unnecessary speculation and theorizing. Every instance in which Kennedy whispers to a dovish Senator or makes a public remark about his desire to be extricated from Vietnam is taken as evidence of his secret intentions; the far more frequent examples of his invoking the domino theory and denouncing the idea of withdrawal are construed as public posturing, designed to deceive conservatives in



Johnson's war: U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1966

order to get re-elected. In fact, it would be more logical to interpret Kennedy's contradictory pronouncements at their two-face value: like most charming politicians, he tended to tell people what they wanted to hear. Even he may not have known what he really planned to do in Vietnam after the election.

In the end, a good historian must realize that the "What if...?" game is indeed just that—a game. Statesmen must be judged by what they did, not by what they might have done. By this measure, Kennedy comes out well in Newman's reckoning. He was not deceived by

the falsely optimistic reports on Vietnam. Despite Pentagon pressure, he did not send in combat troops. And one of his last acts was ordering the withdrawal of a significant number of advisers. Newman has done a good job of making this record clear; he would have done even better had he left it at that. ■