

now know that he was not above using the mob's services when he wanted votes delivered, campaign money contributed, women provided or even a despised foreign leader targeted for "executive action." But taking these favors did not prevent him from unleashing his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, to hound the god-fathers of organized crime with a ferocity they had never before experienced. The supremely confident Jack Kennedy thought he could have it both ways. He couldn't, and he paid the ultimate price for his hubris.

This is not a view of Camelot that finds favor in the liberal press, where Kennedy loyalists still abound, or in Washington circles, where for reasons of bureaucratic self-interest many still prefer that JFK's dark secrets remain buried with him at Arlington National Cemetery. But this interpretation of the crime of the century has been slowly gathering momentum for the last 12 years, ever since the House Select Committee on Assassinations found that the shooting was probably the result of a conspiracy — and that the primary suspects were some of the Mafia's most powerful overlords. In the words of the congressional report, these gangsters had "the means, the motive and the opportunity" to kill the president. "The mob typically doesn't hit prosecutors or politicians," says G. Robert Blakey, the expert on organized crime who served as chief counsel for the committee. "You are all right ... just as long as you do not 'sleep with them,' that is, you do not take favors, either money or sex," Blakey wrote in his book, *The Plot to Kill the President*. "Once the public official crosses the line, he invites violent retribution." In Blakey's mind, the Mafia had good reason to believe that Jack Kennedy had crossed the line.

Blakey, who battled organized crime as a young prosecutor in Bobby Kennedy's Justice Department and now teaches law at the University of Notre Dame, is still clearly sympathetic to the

Kennedy legend. But his work on the House Assassination Committee, which was chaired by Rep. Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, and his subsequent book (which will be reissued in paperback this summer under the title *Fatal Hour*) present a compelling case for a darker interpretation of Camelot. Since the committee released its report in 1979, other assassination researchers have fleshed out this portrait of a president who thought he could consort with the devil and get away with it. The most interesting research has been produced by former BBC reporter Anthony Summers, author of *Conspiracy*, a book about the assassination, and *Goddess*, a biography of Marilyn Monroe that focuses heavily on the sex symbol's relationships with the Kennedys and the mob.

When he wrote *Conspiracy*, which was published in 1988, Summers still thought of President Kennedy as the noble victim evildoers — "this in my innocence of a dozen years ago," Summers says today. But his later research on the Monroe book, which came out in 1985, and on his work-in-progress about J. Edgar Hoover, led him to think that was not the entire story. "The dividing line between the Kennedy clique and the mob, particularly in Miami, is virtually invisible," he says. "If, as the two most powerful political figures in the country, you mess with mobsters and fall with style, you're going to get in trouble. The Kennedys were just constantly pushing their luck, and it finally ran out."

Summers rushes to say that neither he nor any other assassination researcher has solved the crime. "None of us should pretend that we definitely know what happened, because we don't," he says. "I personally tend toward the conspiracy explanation, but anybody who's serious about this case has to remain open to everything, including the possibility that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, as the Warren Commission concluded." (See page 25 for a defense of t

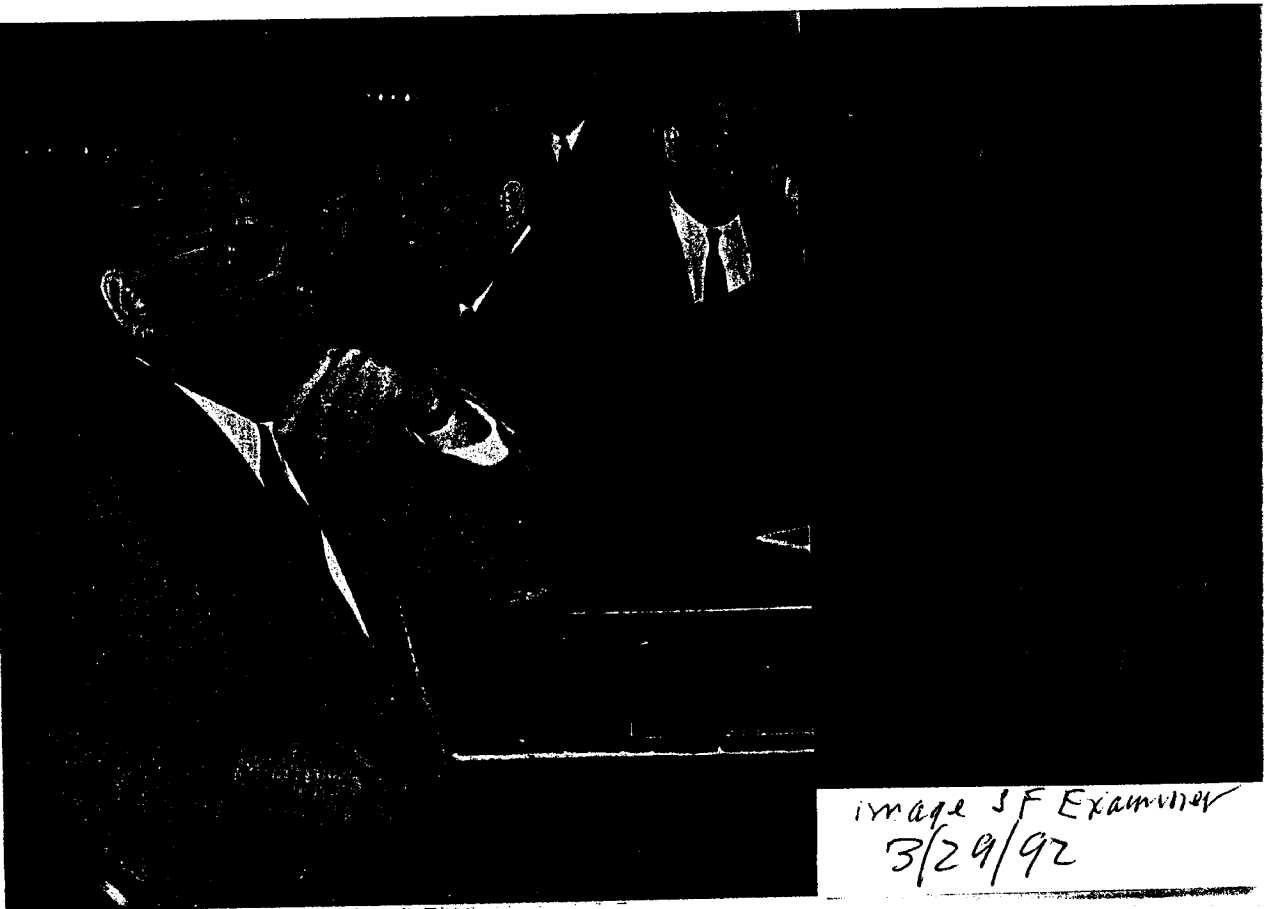


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CONSPIRACY OF DUNCES: A REBUTTAL BY A.S. ROSS

IT'S NOT EASY BEING A JFK ASSASSINATION JUNKIE, what with about 600 books to read, 700 cubic feet of documents in the National Archives to pore over, not to mention countless factoids, tips and theories to assess, and Kevin Costner's *faux* Southern accent to listen to.

It's particularly hard when there's not one single shred of hard evidence that indicates a conspiracy. No second gun, smoking or otherwise, no tell-tale shell casings, no wise guy singing his heart out in a witness-protection program. Nothing.

What do we have after 28 years of searching? At least 60 different versions of the shooting, at last count, with about 33 different assassins in or around Dealey Plaza. We've got "second Oswalds," fake Oswalds, fake photos of Oswald, fake Secret Service agents, Kennedy's "missing brain," fake photos of Kennedy's brain, fake photos of his autopsy, faked wounds, switched bodies, mysterious tramps, the "umbrella man."

And who did it? Lyndon Johnson, J. Edgar Hoover, H.L. Hunt, E. Howard Hunt, the official CIA, the renegade CIA, the KGB, the renegade KGB, anti-Castro Cubans, pro-Castro Cubans, the Chicago mob, the New Orleans mob, the Florida mob, the "Corsican connection" (the French did it). Or maybe it was that luckless Secret Service agent, in a sick imitation of Chevy Chase, who leapt up in the car behind JFK and misfired into the president's head.

Call me a patsy, a tool of mainstream media, a part of the conspiracy (I was working the night shift in a bakery in Brighton, England, on Nov. 22, 1963). But here goes: *I believe the Warren Commission.*

Calm down. Let me try to explain.

The summary and 26 volumes of the Warren Commission report boil down to three key evidentiary findings which, unfortunately for the conspiracy theorists, look better the more closely they are examined.

● **The "magic bullet."** Yes, we've all had a jolly good laugh at this one. This was the bullet the now-hated Arlen Specter theorized entering Kennedy's back, exiting his neck, proceeding on to hit Texas Gov. John Connally in the back, wrist and thigh, before dropping out onto his stretcher in near-mint condition.

What seemed impossible turns out to be "highly likely," according to a sophisticated technical analysis of the bullet remains not available to the Warren Commission. Fragments found in Connally's wrist indeed came from Oswald's rifle; they matched the bullet on the stretcher. Experts who analyzed still pictures and the Abraham Zapruder film for the House Assassinations Committee in the 1970s testified that the one bullet could have hit both Kennedy and Connally just as the Warren Commission described — and that the full metal jacket bullet, designed to pass through soft tissue without deformity, could easily have emerged relatively undamaged.

● **The head wound.** "Back and to the left." That's how Kennedy's head moved in the Zapruder film — which we watched, again and again — as half of the president's brain blew out. Proof, surely, that the shot was fired from the front, maybe the grassy knoll.

Nope. Neutron activation analysis of fragments taken from Kennedy's head links the bullet to Oswald's rifle — the one found on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository with Oswald's palm print on it. Pathologists consulted by the House Assassinations Committee said this fatal shot hit the right side of the president's head — from the rear. Enhanced contrasts of the Zapruder film, again not available to the Warren Commission, showed Kennedy's brain matter spraying forward. But why did the head jerk backwards? It was a neuromuscular reaction to the damage being caused to the front of the head as the bullet exited.

● **Three shots.** This is it. If the Warren Commission was wrong that only three shots were fired, then the lone assassin explanation falls apart. Could Oswald have squeezed off all those shots from a bolt-action rifle with faulty sights in the 8.2 seconds allotted by the Zapruder film? No problem, other riflemen consulted by CBS News and by the Assassinations Committee have found. Oswald was at least an average shot, and he had a slow-moving target.

Skeptics did have their brief hour in the sun. Just as it was about to wrap up after two years and \$5.8 million worth of taxpayers' money (and coming up with absolutely nothing), the House Assassinations Committee found a police tape of sounds in Dealey Plaza around the time of the assassination. Acoustics experts consulted by the committee said they detected four "impulses," one of which probably came from the grassy knoll area. Presto! The committee used this as its basis for saying there was a "95 percent chance" that Kennedy was killed as the result of a conspiracy.

As conspiracy theorist Anthony Summers has acknowledged in something of an understatement, the "fourth bullet" has had a "rough ride" since then. Namely, a panel of scientists summoned by the National Academy of Sciences found that the acoustics experts were, quite simply, wrong. For one thing, they found the tape in question was picking up sounds one minute *after* the assassination took place. Taken aback while still hanging in there, G. Robert Blakey, the House Assassinations Committee's chief counsel, has since acknowledged that the acoustical evidence of a conspiracy is not conclusive.

OK, say the "respected" conspiracy theorists, so maybe Oswald did some of the shooting, but he didn't operate alone; he was a "patsy" for (fill in the blank). There is absolutely no evidence to support any of this, either.

It will not be found in the secret House Assassinations Committee files that Oliver Stone is so hot for. Apart from informant files, unsubstantiated tips, and probably more evidence — as if any more were needed — of the utter incompetence of agencies like the CIA and the FBI, they will find no evidence of government agency involvement — "nothing, zilch, nada," says Blakey, who has seen them all.

What about the mob? David Talbot, in his absorbing (he's my editor) but somewhat exaggerated view of JFK as some sort of Made Guy Emeritus, trots out some hoary old chestnuts concerning corrupt Teamster leader Jimmy Hoffa, and mob bosses Santos Trafficante and Carlos Marcello. Mafia expert Ovid Demaris — and Hoffa himself — scoffed at these charges in the 1960s, while relevant FBI wiretaps consist of Sicilian oaths and boasts that Kennedy would be "hit" or "taken care of." The more recent allegations that tie Hoffa, Trafficante and Marcello to Oswald amount to little more than glorified inferences. Absent from them — as is absent from the FBI wiretaps and the mob-involvement theories of Blakey, John H. Davis and Talbot — are any explanation of just who set Oswald up, when and, most importantly, how.

I realize that my public confession of apostasy will do little good. The assorted cranks, true believers and Hollywood know-nothings, with their bestselling books and Academy Award-nominated movies, have far too much at stake ever to acknowledge that they may be wrong. Maybe we've all been reading too many Robert Ludlum novels, with their tweedy-suited villains who look just like former CIA directors. After all, no one ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American public.

Or, to be more charitable, maybe, the lone assassin has never been enough to explain such a nationally traumatic event. "A seriously disturbed guy, a loser, who did it by himself, transforming history. We can't handle this," says James Pennebaker, a psychology professor at Southern Methodist University. "We need a cause commensurate in size with the effect. Conspiracies are much more comforting."

Of course, they always have been: Witches, Jews, Masons, communists — all have been used to explain our discomforts. These days we have a conspiracy of Satanic rings abusing our children. "Ice" people have stolen the history of the "sun" people and given them AIDS.

Historically, and today, such irrational absurdities have only worked to the advantage of cynics and demagogues. For the rest of us, they threaten apathy and despair. If secret governments are killing all "our" leaders; if "they" know all the secrets and control all the levers; if we are all, like Lee Harvey Oswald, mere "patsies," then what's the point? Why bother to vote? Why even bother to think? Why take personal responsibility for our future when we can cruise through life with a permanent sneer of disbelief on our faces? ■

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