

Oswald, Probably

CONSPIRACY

By Anthony Summers.
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By THOMAS POWERS

AFTER scores of interviews and two years immersed in the immense documentary record, the British journalist Anthony Summers has concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald played a "role" in the shooting of John F. Kennedy. This is a breathtaking admission. Although Mr. Summers cannot quite bring himself to say Oswald killed Kennedy, he moves a long way in that direction.

He admits, for example, that Oswald's handwriting was on the mail order form for the gun used to kill the President, that Oswald held the post office box the gun was mailed to, that Oswald had been photographed holding the gun, that Oswald retrieved the gun from a friend's garage and carried it to work on the morning of the murder, that the shots that killed Kennedy and wounded John Connally came from the Texas School Book Depository, that the bullets that killed Kennedy and wounded Governor Connally had been fired from Oswald's gun, that many witnesses saw a gunman in a sixth-floor window of the School Book Depository, that Oswald's gun was found near that window, that shell casings fired in Oswald's gun were found in the same place, that Oswald's palm print was found on the gun, that a tuft of cotton fiber attached to the gun came from Oswald's shirt, that Oswald fled the School Book Depository moments after the shooting, that the Dallas police officer J. D. Tippit was killed with shots fired from a pistol belonging to Oswald not long after, that witnesses said Tippit's killer fled to the nearby Texas Theater, that police arrested Oswald after a brief struggle in the theater, that the gun that killed Tippit was in Oswald's hand at the moment of his arrest, and that Oswald then said, "Well, it's all over now."

One can see why Oswald might have thought so. But Mr. Summers, who is very far from being alone, remains convinced that Oswald — "whatever his role on November 22, 1963" — was only part of a broader conspiracy to kill the President, probably involving disaffected American intelligence officials, anti-Castro Cuban activists and Mafia gangsters. The evidence for these claims is soberly laid out in 523 pages of text and 86 pages of source notes, which have the virtue of collating just about everything anybody has ever reported on the subject of John F. Kennedy's murder. If you've ever been curious about the mysterious "Maurice Bishop" of the C.I.A., or the role of Loran Hall, or whether New Orleans prosecutor Jim Garrison really had the goods, or which Mafia chieftain said Kennedy was going to get his, the Silvia Odio incident, or Jack Ruby's alleged visit to Santos Trafficante in a Cuban prison, "Conspiracy" is the place to look.

Mr. Summers has one irritating characteristic common to Kennedy assassination researchers — a kind of nutty completeness. He raises doubts he doesn't quite credit himself — for example, that Oswald's Russian wife, Marina, might have been a K.G.B. agent, or that

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Drawings by Andrzej Dudzinski

someone else might have shot Patrolman Tippit, or that Oswald couldn't have gone to Helsinki in 1959 on the day the documents say he did. There is no such thing as a universally accepted factual claim about Lee Harvey Oswald; all are contested by somebody, and Mr. Summers lets everybody have his say. This makes his book a useful mine (especially because his careful notes identify the source of every claim), but diffuses his argument, since many of the "discrepancies" point to conspiracies Mr. Summers appears to have rejected. It is not easy to figure out just what it is Mr. Summers thinks happened.

When the conclusion finally emerges on page 514, it is a curiously tentative mouse, after such elephantine labor. "It is certainly possible that a renegade element in U.S. intelligence manipulated Oswald — whatever his role on November 22, 1963. That same element may have activated pawns in the anti-Castro movement and the Mafia to murder the President and execute Oswald."

Mr. Summers begins where the House Select Committee on Assassinations recently left off: with the assumption there *must* have been a conspiracy because acoustical tests of a dictabelt recording of police radio transmissions on the day of the murder prove that four — not three — shots were fired in Dealey Plaza. Since it was hard to see how Oswald could have fired three shots in the time indicated by the Zapruder film (the committee concluded, and Mr. Summers agrees, that he *did* fire the three shots, and that those three shots killed Kennedy and wounded John Connally) the fourth shot must have come from a second man. The acoustical experts said it came from the notorious grassy knoll in front of Kennedy's car. (As usual many points remain unclear, and Mr. Summers cites contradictory testimony that, added up, suggests there might have been six conspirators on the scene in all.) The acoustical evidence is accepted by Mr. Summers as gospel, in spite of the fact that the fourth shot does not sound like a gunshot to the naked ear, and serious investigators question just where the transmission recorded at police headquarters came from.

Mr. Summers's book, at any rate, certainly does not prove anything, but it does suggest one reason the Kennedy assassination continues to exercise a kind of terrible fascination. The great glaring omission of the Warren Commission Report was its now-apparent refusal to enter the conspiratorial underworld, much of

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It funded and directed by the C.I.A. and devoted to the overthrow of Fidel Castro. Naturally Castro had his own agents seeded among his opponents, and the F.B.I. tried to keep an eye on them, on its rivals in the C.I.A., on the Mafia, on the extremist fringe of the anti-Castro movement, and on American leftists who supported Castro. The C.I.A.'s use of the Mafia in plots to kill Castro only thickened the soup. There is no question Oswald had at least a toe in this great cauldron, with the result that the "associates" of his "associates" spread out very far indeed, none of them inclined by temperament, profession or circumstances to tell a straight story. The assassination researchers rightly sensed there was much to be learned here, and the search for the "truth" about Kennedy has proved an effective tool in opening up secret files.

But the question remains whether any of the plotters who were only an "associate" or two removed from Oswald had anything to do with Kennedy's assassination. Mr. Summers thinks we need still another investigation to find out. My own feeling is that it would doubtless turn up interesting material, but that Oswald will ultimately remain as alone in the killing as he was in life. The simplicity and psychological coherence of this explanation are brilliantly argued in Priscilla McMillan's "Marina and Lee," which I think is still the best book about the assassination.

A little over a month before the shooting, on Oct. 16, 1963, Oswald went to work at the

Texas School Book Depository in Dallas. On the weekend of Nov. 16-17, Oswald remained alone in his boarding house room, where he fixed his own meals. The papers that weekend were full of plans for Kennedy's visit, but his motorcade route was not published until Tuesday, Nov. 19. Conspirators planning to kill Kennedy could not have known until then that Oswald's job might provide an ideal post for an assassin. When Oswald left for work on Thursday morning, the fact that he did not bring his pistol with him — although he planned to spend the night with his wife at a friend's house outside Dallas — suggests he did not yet think he was going to need it. (After the shooting, he returned to his room for the pistol.)

That night he retrieved his rifle from the friend's garage and wrapped it with brown paper and tape brought from the depository. The next morning he told a friend, who drove him to work, that the parcel contained curtain rods. It was a curiously domestic detail for a man whose family had left him. In those few final days, almost entirely accounted for, there does not seem to me to be much room for frantic last-minute plotting with renegade C.I.A. officers, anti-Castro extremists and Mafia gangsters. But others think otherwise. ■

Books of The Times

By Christopher Lehmann-Haupt

CONSPIRACY. By Anthony Summers. 640 pages. Illustrated. McGraw-Hill, \$17.50.

HERE have been so many books written about the assassination of President Kennedy — and among them so many of dubious merit and provenance — that the mind tends to freeze over: at the prospect of yet another one. So what exactly is it about Anthony Summers's "Conspiracy" — an exhaustive review of what the author calls "the crime — and the controversy" — of the century, by a British investigative reporter with many years of experience working with the British Broadcasting Corporation — that makes it seem so relatively fresh and important?

Most obviously, it's the changed atmosphere of American life in which it is published. We have come so far down the road of disillusionment since 1963 — what with Vietnam, Watergate and other political murders — that fantasies of conspiracy we scoffed at 15 years ago no longer seem nearly so implausible. So it is now with almost a shrug that we arrive at Mr. Summers's conclusion that while Lee Harvey Oswald had something to do with President Kennedy's assassination (he may even have fired three shots from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository), he was somehow part of a conspiracy involving anti-Castro

Cuban exiles, members of the Mafia and what Mr. Summers calls "a renegade element in U.S. intelligence" services.

A New Sense Evoked

Almost as obvious an explanation for the distinctiveness of "Conspiracy" is the fact that it is the first major book to appear since the House Select Committee on Assassinations delivered its final report in 1979. Also, it's the first book to take cognizance of the committee's astonishing conclusions, based on an accounting made at the scene of the assassination, that four bullets, not three, were fired during the 9.31 seconds that gunshots were heard in Dealey Plaza in Dallas that day; therefore there had to be more than one gunman involved; and therefore President Kennedy "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy."

Then there is the sense of summery that Mr. Summers's book inspires — the feeling it arouses that if over the years we've been lulled to sleep by the obsessiveness and obscurity of certain conspiracy theorists, here is the perfect opportunity to wake up and be refreshed. For not only is "Conspiracy" an exhaustive assessment of every cranky supposition and mystifying piece of evidence from the "two-Oswald theory" to the so-called "magic

bullet," it also represents a wealth of fresh investigation, including interviews by Mr. Summers with witnesses who have never been formally talked to before.

Finally, this book seems worthwhile simply because it is skillfully and compellingly written. Indeed, it is so dramatically constructed that not even the author's attraction to blind alleys serves to put us off. Even where Mr. Summers pauses to introduce speculations he can't satisfactorily resolve — such as the possibility that Oswald fired no shots at all, or that he was seen in the company of a United States Intelligence case officer only weeks before the assassination — we rush on through his narrative as if we were reading an artful thriller.

'Coincidences' Cited

Of course "Conspiracy" offers no firm conclusions. It doesn't begin to attempt an explanation of the technique of "expert" acoustic analysis; it presses instead an almost ritual observance to the authority of the word "scientific." It doesn't suggest the identity of any other figure who might have pulled a trigger on Nov. 22, 1963. And in the process of chasing down the many obscure but disturbing coincidences that have surrounded this case, it falls down a hole leading to the most elaborate set of coincidences of all. But once you accept the notion that Oswald was "set up," you have to explain how his manipulators happened to pick "a patsy" who happened to get a job in a building part which the President's motorcade happened to proceed at a time that happened to be ideal. And this



Anthony Summers

Mr. Summers has not even begun to do. Still, "Conspiracy" serves to dramatize, as no previous book has done, the superficiality of the Warren Commission's investigation and report. It reveals the appalling degree to which the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the various branches of Military Intelligence have failed to cooperate with the official investigations. And if it discourages any expectation that the complete truth behind the assassination in Dallas will some day be known, it gives us reason to hope that eventually we will know a little more than we understand today.