

BOOKS

Dallas Again: The Plot Sickens

By Eliot Fremont-Smith

CONSPIRACY. By Anthony Summers. McGraw-Hill. \$17.95.

That the Warren Commission investigation of the JFK assassination was inadequate has been known for a very long time. That it was under great psychological pressure to find no conspiracy has also been long known. (President Johnson believed Castro ordered the assassination, but didn't want such a verdict because that could mean war.) More recently, it has become a fact of record that the commission was deliberately lied to on crucial matters by both the FBI and the CIA. Beyond this, a hundred loose ends have been dangling in the wind for over 16 years; hardly a single aspect of the event—from the extraordinarily unprofessional and bungled autopsy on—has failed to raise disturbing questions.

Yet, until very recently, I, for one, have resisted conspiracy interpretations. The reasons are many—Anthony Summers has a good compendium of them at the beginning of his book—and they certainly include wish: Once in a while, at least, things are as they seem; not everything is the result of some complex, calculated, hidden plot. My resistance to conspiracy theory in general is based on evidence of my own experience—convenience, coincidence, and ignorance are usually the true conspirators in what looks to some like planned design—as well as on a self-defensive refusal to accept paranoia as a way of life.

In the Oswald matter, until recently, it has not been a great strain to prefer, despite all the loose ends and oddities, the Oswald-did-it-and-did-it-alone interpretation to all others. In the first place, it was the simplest theory (and had, and still has, an abundance of circumstantial and psychological support); rival theories seemed (and still seem) overburdened with complexity. I think (want to think, of course, but still do think) that very few secrets are kept, and hardly any that in-

volve more than two people. It's been 16 years since Dallas and every conspiracy theory of the assassination involves large numbers of people as well as amazing timing, prescience, and luck. To believe Ruby was mandated to murder Oswald (for crucial instance) is to believe Dallas police officials were also part of an overall assassination plot and kept Ruby informed as to when the actual prison transfer would take place—for Ruby was late, and had the transfer taken place as scheduled, Oswald might be alive today.

Then, too, the evidence of the conspiracy theorists was usually suspect and presented with irresponsible assertion. Enormous fuss was made over photos ("doctored" and/or of "doubles") without any hint that photos can fool. Photographic evidence must always be suspect; Summers thinks that an analysis of a blob in an old and damaged snap of the grassy knoll will reveal a head, presumably of a second gunman. Well, it certainly should be analyzed, but I can tell you now that a "head" will not be definitively distinguishable from an accident of light or a chemical fault. Technology still has its limits, and they are far more humbling than technologists willingly admit.

Likewise, Summers is too certain (as is Andrew Hacker in the current *New York Review of Books*) that the recently discovered acoustical tape of the assassination, recorded accidentally by a motorcycle police escort in Dealy Plaza, proves that there were four shots (and therefore a second gunman and therefore a conspiracy). The best acoustical analysis suggests four shots, but the best is not exact enough to prove anything; one is talking here of experts' estimates of likelihoods of what's on a very messy tape, above the motorcycle's noise and, apparently, noise from other sources (the tape is a police headquarters dictabelt, with various messages coming in). So, technology, I maintain, can only raise possibilities and likelihoods, not establish irrefutable truth



Seeing is believing?irate citizen demands rough justice to accused assassin—or mafia hit-man silences CIA patsy?

of what was going down on November 22, 1963.

Which leaves circumstantial evidence. And it is this, I believe, that has shifted the balance—or anyway now does shift it in Summers's huge, exhaustive, deeply unsettling book. I haven't gone over to the other side, but I am persuaded that the Oswald-alone theory no longer outweighs conspiracy.

What Summers (a BBC reporter) has done is assemble all the latest information, much of it from the huge (though truncated) findings of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, and present it, with apparent scrupulousness, in the form of a detailed inquiry of the coincidences, questions, and loose ends. And there are simply too many of them, and they cut too deeply, for easy dismissal. What they point to is a conspiracy of Oswald, the CIA, the mafia, and possibly certain anti-Castro exile groups, to murder the president and cover up the murder in order (1) to prevent a diplomatic rapprochement with Cuba that Kennedy was exploring (a fact, and only recently revealed—though it does not follow that rapprochement was settled policy or would have been successful), and (2) to put a halt on the administration's (specifically Attorney General Robert Kennedy's) war on organized crime in America.

Beyond all the loose ends and discrepancies (e.g., if Oswald was such a good

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real workers could disabuse him of this distinctly undemocratic opinion. When facts failed to confirm his prejudices, fantasy took over—supplying, for example, a full chamberpot under a low-class break-

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shot; and he may have been, now come he
missed General Walker?—indeed, why
Walker at all?), the scenario rests on two
interrelated series of facts that have come
to light in recent years. The first is that
the CIA has lied over and over again on
matters connected with the assassination
—from its awareness of Oswald to its plots
with mafia figures to kill or disable Castro,
plots that we now know were carried on
without Kennedy's knowledge (in 1963)
and in subversion of whatever diplomatic
normalization he had directed be ex-
plored.

At which point one must distinguish
between the monolith CIA and the CIA as
composed of elements that, by system as
well as paranoia, operate independently.
It is Summers's supposition that the Cuba
element was out of control (again, we know
this to be true to some degree, both in the
Bay of Pigs and Watergate phenomena)
and that the CIA as monolith was not fully
cognizant of its activities—though both
Allen Dulles and Richard Helms knew
something and committed perjury.

In a nutshell: insofar as Cuba was con-
cerned, this element in the CIA, operating
on its own but protected at the top (it
shouldn't get around, *whatever the stakes*,
that the CIA was wholly disorganized),
was bent on its own foreign policy, even if
it meant treason and assassination of the
president. (About the same thing when
you come right down to it; one is the
expression of the other. Read Gordon Lid-
dy: to the mundane mind, clandestine
commitment is absolute—it means *no lim-
its*.)

The Oswald connection? It is both
foggy and definite. The fogginess, which is
all over, could be dismissed except for the
definite part—which is that the CIA lied
and spread "disinformation" about its
connections with Oswald (who appears to
have been a low-level agent, possibly a
double-agent with CIA knowledge), and
appears to have deliberately hidden and
destroyed evidence pertinent to the as-
sassination inquiry. The FBI, which has
also destroyed evidence (as has the Pen-
tagon), seems to have played a lesser role,
and also more definable: J. Edgar Hoover
protecting his incompetency, contacts
with the underworld, and perceived mis-
sion for the FBI, to subvert the liberal-left
at home (the FBI program to destroy
Martin Luther King was just starting).

The second, really dovetailing part of
the scenario, involves the mafia—begin-
ning with the CIA's recruitment of top
figures in organized crime to participate in
disabling Castro, and ending (?) with the
extraordinary connections of nearly ev-
eryone involved in the assassination and
its aftermath with the mafia. (Only

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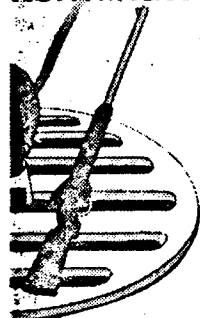
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from feudalism to health insurance and a pension. Ultimately, after much ranting and suspicion, the women evolved a powerful and lasting friendship. Cornelisen has never lost her sense of its rarity and value.

It is because of her experiences as an alien that Cornelisen can write so subtly and compassionately about worker-emigrants in *Strangers and Pilgrims*, her third

towed — sun tanks padding. ... forgotten the feuds and the backbiting ... and the mess of it all," he says of Torregreca, but "the truth is no man wants to die a stranger among strangers. ... Not still a stranger."

Cornelisen agrees. "A foreign country is like falling off the edge of the earth. Only the desperate leave." The Torregrecans in Germany live saturated in anomaly. They

DALLAS AGAIN

Continued from preceding page

Michael and Ruth Paine, who befriended Oswald in Dallas and introduced him to the ACLU, seem exempt; and even this detail has peculiarities, with Oswald calling the ACLU for info on how to start a chapter just after the Paines had taken him to one.)

Moreover, the mafia connections lead either to Cuba or to the Dallas police, with small-time hood Ruby extremely and inexplicably busy at both ends, and police (who, in amazing numbers, knew Ruby, and may have kept him abreast of the transfer and let him in a side-door, not mentioned in any official report but there all the same) who are not interrogated, or refuse to answer questions, or demand lie-detector tests they then fail. It is most peculiar; Summers's book is, at the least, profoundly disorienting.

Style can count for too much. Summers's style seems responsible; what hyperboles there are are tamed in a wealth of meticulousness. Summers is a fussbudget, but keeps his claims in check. His hypothesis is labeled as that and is open-ended. He doesn't have the answers, and is honest about the extravagant implications of any Oswald-plus thesis. The central implication is that if there was a conspiracy, it wasn't narrow or two-bit; it reached into very high spheres of our government and very high officials knowingly covered up treason. It does boggle.

As I say, I'm not ready to buy outright Summers's conspiracy theory—the network he suggests is too extensive and too complicated, and too many people (both mundane and frenzied "patriots") are included who won't talk even though their basic loyalty and personal integrity is on the line. But the force of his compilation is such that I can no longer say that the Oswald-alone theory makes better sense, or even has satisfactory coherence. The suspension of disbelief seems now commanded in regard to the most painful scenario possible—the stuff of fiction, in point of fact the stuff of John Ehrlichman's most arresting Nixon fiction—and likewise the suspension of belief in Oswald as the lone and lucky assassin. I say "suspension," and I mean just that—Summers's book does not make conspiracy easy or easily assimilable; but it raises so many specific questions that some of them must be answered before anyone can say

again that Oswald-alone makes better sense than some horrendous alternative.

Summers ends his book with a startling find and plea. The find is that, even during and after the House Committee report, the major press did and has done nothing to investigate seriously (on a par, say, with Watergate) the JFK assassination. He documents this with wishes like my own, plus an assumption that dissent is a job for kooks (he doesn't say this, but it's also true—that the major media does not wish to prove kooks right), plus understandable tiredness. *Oswald again? That's 16 years ago.* Also patriotism: We clearly need some kind of functioning CIA (it was right about the hostages), so don't rock the boat. And it is possible that the full truth about the assassination would destroy the CIA as we know it—an almost inevitable, if temporary, consequence of a finding of official and calculated treason.

Yet what is the job of the press if not to follow leads of national interest and consciousness? Summers offers many leads (many still alive) in his book. It is important that we know if a major instrument of government has worked by extreme means for extreme ends to destroy an elected (for good or ill) government policy. If it has happened, it must not happen again; and the only safeguard for this is, truly, the truth. And then, finally, there is justice, and the rule of law. On murder, there is no statute of limitations.

I worry for my country, myself, those dear to me. There are many problems, and solutions are not in sight. For a long time I thought the JFK assassination was, whatever the regrets and "only ifs" and remembered trauma and mourning, not a problem. At least we had the most sensible answer to that: Lee Harvey Oswald, misfit, shot and killed the president by happenstance and alone; it could happen anywhere, any time, one of those things. And I fought the good fight to maintain that belief—that most likely of possibilities.

No more. I now think it is possible that the Kennedy assassination was the most far reaching-state crime ever committed in this country. If so, the culprits are undetected, and some are still alive, and a criminal government still exists. If not so, we need to know that too. For the press, it should be the biggest story ever. So why doesn't it move? I know why. I've told why in this review. The excuses are understandable in hindsight; they don't suffice now.