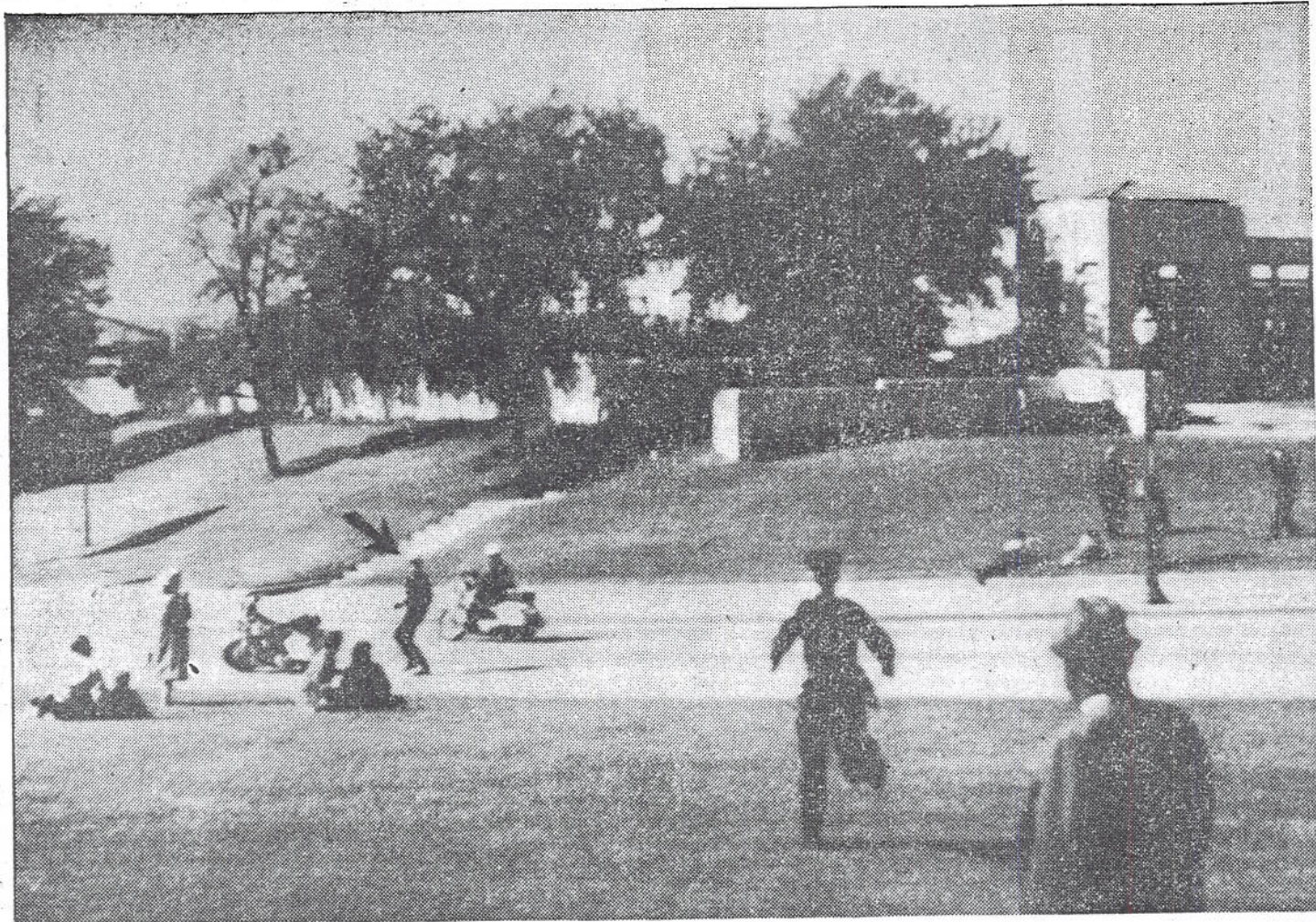


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A Times Profile

Kennedy Assassination

All the world loves a conspiracy



The "other gunman" theory:

This photograph was believed to support the idea that Kennedy

was shot by an unidentified sniper

from a grassy knoll above Elm Street-the policeman (arrowed)

was thought to be looking towards the spot

With many other people I can remember what I was doing when President Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963. Alas, I was not with him in Dallas. Mr. Kennedy had gone to Texas to launch his campaign for reelection one year later, and I decided that it was much too early to begin boring readers of *The Times* by indulging in my secret passion for Democratic presidential campaigns.

I was in the Washington office when the warning bell sounded on the news printer, and I can remember watching horrified as the machine slowly tapped out the first bulletin. I occasionally awake in a cold sweat in the small hours but not only because I had missed one of the great stories of the century. After all these years, the Kennedy assassination has not yet become another chapter in the history books. Too many people still refuse to believe the official version of what really happened that day.

The Warren Commission concluded that the assassin was Lee Harvey Oswald, and that neither he nor Jack Ruby, his murderer, was part of a conspiracy, domestic or foreign. The chairman of the commission was the late Chief Justice of the United States, Mr. Earl Warren. Among its distinguished members was Mr. Gerald Ford, now President of the United States. The commission heard 552 witnesses and received more than 3,000 reports from law-enforcement agencies, which had conducted 26,000 interviews. The evidence filled 26 volumes, but all this was rejected as a whitewash.

Several theories were evolved purporting to prove that the assassination was the result of a conspiracy, that Oswald could not have fired all the bullets, and that the victim was shot from the front and not from the rear. A photograph was said to prove that an unidentified sniper also fired from a grassy knoll above Elm Street.

Four years later, Mr. Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney, claimed that there was a conspiracy, launched his own bizarre inquiry and unsuccessfully brought charges. Mr. John Sparrow, Warden of All Souls College, Oxford, took 17,000 words to defend the commission in *The Times Literary Supplement*. One of the disbelievers, Mr. Mark Lane, retorted that Mr. Sparrow's article was "based almost entirely upon his abysmal ignorance of the facts and his own prejudice".

The disbelievers published their versions in about two dozen books. Four novels, three feature films and innumerable television programmes followed. Some preferred to believe that Oswald was innocent simply because he denied responsibility before he himself was killed by Ruby, a small-time crook. Others believed that Oswald was an agent or informer for the Central Intelligence Agency or the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Two Watergate conspirators, Howard Hunt and Frank Sturgis, were afterwards said to be in Dallas at the time, and were actually briefly detained at the scene of the assassination.

Earlier this year, Mr. Henry Gonzales, a Texas congressman, formally proposed that Congress should review the case. This may have helped persuade the Rockefeller Commission on the CIA to announce a few days ago that the agency and the Watergate conspirators were in no way involved. The Vice-President succeeded only in arousing

suspicion again.

Given man's weakness for the conspirational theory of history, one must assume that millions of people all over the world share the doubts of the disbelievers nearly 12 years after the event. This is unhealthy and possibly dangerous. For that reason, the question should be posed again. What really happened?

The Warren Commission concluded that the shots that killed President Kennedy and wounded Governor Connally were fired from the sixth-floor window at the southeast corner of the Texas School Book Depository. This was determined upon the following:

- Witnesses saw a rifle fired from the window.
- The three bullets were fired from the 6.5mm Mannlicher-Carcano rifle found on the sixth floor of the depository.
- The three used cartridge cases found near the rifle were fired from the same rifle.
- The windscreen of the presidential limousine was struck by a bullet fragment

on the inside surface of the glass, but was not penetrated.

- The nature of the wounds and the position of the car at the time of the shooting proved that the shots were fired from above and behind the limousine.

- President Kennedy was first struck by a bullet which entered at the back of his neck and exited through the lower front portion of his neck. The second bullet entered the right-rear portion of his head, causing a massive and fatal wound.

The commission concluded that Oswald fired the shots because:

- The rifle was owned by and in the possession of Oswald.

- Oswald carried the rifle into the depository that morning.

- Oswald, at the time of the assassination, was present at the window from which the shots were fired.

- After the assassination, the rifle and the improvised paper bag, in which Oswald brought it to the depository, were found on the sixth floor.

- A rifleman of Oswald's capabilities could have fired the shots within the elapsed time of shooting.

- Oswald lied to the police after his arrest.

- Oswald had attempted to kill Major General Edwin Walker on April 10, 1963, thereby demonstrating his disposition towards human life.

The commission also concluded that Oswald killed police patrolman J. D. Tippit approximately 45 minutes after the assassination; that nine eye-witnesses positively identified Oswald; that cartridge cases found at the scene of this shooting were fired from the revolver in Oswald's possession at the time of his arrest; that the revolver was purchased by and belonged to Oswald; that Oswald's jacket was found along the path of flight taken by the gunman; and that 35 minutes after the Tippit killing Oswald resisted arrest by attempting to shoot another police officer.

As to the murder of Oswald by Jack Ruby on November 24, 1963, the commission concluded that Ruby entered the basement of the Dallas police department shortly after 11.17 am and killed Oswald at 11.21 am; that there was no evidence to support the rumour that Ruby may have been assisted by any members of the police department in the killing of Oswald; and that the decision to transfer Oswald to the county jail in full public view was unsound. Of critical importance was the fact that reporters and others were not excluded from the basement even after the police were notified of threats to Oswald's life.

The commission found no evidence that Oswald was involved with any person or group in a conspiracy to assassinate the President, although it had thoroughly investigated all facets of Oswald's associations, finances, and personal habits, particularly during the period following his return from the Soviet Union in June 1962. No evidence was found to show that Oswald was employed, persuaded, or encouraged by any foreign government to assassinate the President, although it had reviewed the circumstances surrounding his defection to the Soviet Union, his life there, his known contacts with the Fair Play for Cuba committee, and his contacts with the Cuban and Soviet embassies.

As for Oswald the man, the former Marine, the commission concluded on the evidence available that he acted alone; and although it could not determine his motives, there were personal factors that might have influenced his decision. These included his deep-rooted resentment of all authority; his inability to enter meaningful relationships with people and a continuous pattern of rejecting his environment in favour of new surroundings; his urge to try to find a place in history, and his despair at times over his failure.

There was also his avowed commitment to Marxism and communism, which was expressed by his antagonism towards the United States, his defection to the Soviet Union and his efforts to go to Cuba. Each of these contributed to his capacity to risk all in cruel and irresponsible actions.

The picture drawn by the commission report is of a rootless and angry man without a cause. The world was to have experience of many such men afterwards,

the assassin of Robert Kennedy, the radical Weathermen, the Ulster sectarian terrorists, the Angry Brigade, the Baader-Meinhoff gang, and many more. Perhaps because Oswald was one of the first to emerge many people found it difficult to accept such mindless violence. Then there was his murder, which snuffed out not only the alleged assassin but also hopes of substantiating first-hand evidence. The deficiencies of the Secret Service and the Dallas police department also fed suspicion.

That said, even its defenders admit that the Warren Commission's report contains unanswered questions and unresolved anomalies. One suggestion is that the members were so distinguished that they had too little time to devote to the investigation. Another, rarely articulated but in the back of many rational minds, is that faced with a political crisis of the greatest magnitude, the commission, or some of its members, reached, perhaps un-

wittingly, for the easy solution of blaming a dead man.

Perhaps. Chief Justices of the United States are political animals as well as jurists. It is human, and very American, to bury the past and face the future without unnecessary encumbrances. An untried and unelected President was in the White House, the country was deeply divided—the depths of the divisions were soon to become self-evident—and the suggestion that Oswald was a creature of the communists and/or the CIA was too dangerous to be allowed to lurk in dark minds.

These are but a few of the possible factors which could have influenced the commission, but I reject them. Chief Justice Warren may have been a disappointed politician, but he was an honourable man, a reformer, a judge who always asked himself the question "is it fair?" I for one refuse to believe that he would have been party to what itself would be a conspiracy, a conspiracy of elitists who believed that they knew what it was best for the nation to know.

That, of course, is only a personal opinion. More to the point, none of the theories put forward by the disbelievers is really persuasive, and those based on alleged evidence have been disproved. For instance, the disbelievers argued that the film shot by Orville Nix, an amateur photographer, was evidence that a sniper was on that grassy knoll above Elm Street. It was arguable, at least for the suspicious, but the Itek Corporation, which specializes in photographic analysis, concluded that the purported figure of a rifleman was actually the shadow of a tree.

The Rockefeller Commission also proved beyond reasonable doubt that the photographs of tramps taken on the day of the assassination were not of Hunt and Sturgis, the Watergate conspirators. As for the Zapruder film, which seemed to suggest that Kennedy was also shot from the front, the experts consulted said that a head wound produces an explosion of tissue at the area where the bullet leaves the head, and causes a jet effect which almost instantly moves the head back in the direction from which the bullet came.

Other conspirational theories have either been disproved or shown to be inconclusive, and many rational men and women have long been prepared to accept the conclusions of the Warren Commission report, despite its imperfections. They were no more or less than could be expected. A commission or court can only go on the evidence available, but the scope of the official investigation was unprecedented. It is possibly worthwhile to remember that the late Mr J. Edgar Hoover was then the director of the FBI, and he had always believed in the theory of international communist conspiracy. One can assume that he did his best to prove that President Kennedy was its victim.

It remains that man, especially American man, is prone to accept the conspirational theory of history. Watergate demonstrated that a conspiracy could be hatched and implemented from the White House, which is under constant surveillance from the press and Congress. This, no doubt, will keep alive the conspirational theories about the Kennedy assassination, in spite of the fact that unlike Watergate, no Bernstein and Woodward has proved them.

Louis Heren

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