

Jeff Morley, Outlook  
The Washington Post  
1150 15 St ., NW  
Washington, DC 20071

11/19/96

Dear Jeff,

After reading your non-responsive tirade about my letter of the 11th I got my letter out and reread it. My last words in it, after I expressed concern that you may have hurt yourself, are "I hope you learn from this. It could have been hurtful to you." That is a bit less than calling you an "idiot" or a "shit." I could make the idiot case out that would do no good, and serve no real interest.

I also read your unsourced enclosure. It also goes into what you mention in your letter, consensus. Consensus based on uniformed opinion is what you are really talking about.

As a reporter I believe you should believe that where fact is available there is no substitute for fact. You argue that those who have not taken the time and trouble to learn the fact <sup>ought</sup> fix national policy on the basis of what they believe rather than the fact of which they are ignorant.

I did refer to your plug as unprofessional and I see no reason to change that at all. As I pointed out, you had reason to believe you should have checked with me and you did not.

I am not responsible for your lack of subject-matter knowledge but you are responsible for what you say and do based on that subject-matter ignorance.

After getting from me what I wrote after the LaFontaine's crap appeared in the Post you did not check a thing. You were aware of some of the lies that their crap depends on from what I wrote and you merely accepted their reformulation of the same lies.

You believe what you want to believe and you refuse to think of anything else. You concede, more or less, that their reference to what I wrote in Oswald in New Orleans is not exactly that but at the same time you insist on their fabrication, that one and others.

I did not tell you that I brought all those great "silicon Valley cavalry" documents to light years before that fool Adams used FOIA to get them so long after they were public - seeking credit. My point was so you could evaluate them, what they say, what they claim - their abysmal subject-matter ignorance. There is absolutely no Elrod relevance, as there was no tramp relevance. And much as you want to believe what the LaFontaines say Elrod said, you were silent when I pointed out that on videotape he steadfastly refused to say anything at all like that. And they claimed to have 33 such cassettes.

Whether or not there was a conspiracy is a matter of fact, not of opinion.

Official fact, too. And it has been readily available to you for years. I put more than enough of it together long ago and more recently in NEVER AGAIN!

You refer to "public enlightenment." ~~That~~ That is not possible with lies, and what the LaFontaines put together was a string of lies. It is not possible from fictions about Oswald and "by being part of a gun-running combine and the other fiction that Oswald talked when he did not and could not have.

There is not much possibility that there is a smoking gun in withheld official files. So, there is not much possibility of any disclosure from them solving the case. We thus are past the point where the official secrecy is the real problem. The real problem is getting the official-established truth to the people in some meaningful form. That is frustrated by the indecency of the La Fontaine whoring with our history as they do. They are cheap sensation-seekers and no more.

There is no relevant New Orleans evidence that secrecy withheld from me. There certainly is not in the La Fontaine book. And contrary to your use of the word, ~~they~~ they did not put together any "evidence" ~~new~~ new or old in an honest or truthful account of Oswald.

For the record for history I wrote ~~much~~ <sup>much</sup> more about that indecency long ago. I wrote you in your interest but you are hung up on implausible, impossible theories for which you seek a consensus that would in the end, at some point, deny the people the truth.

If you want to find out just how bad your judgement was, I think your departure from professionalism, come up and I'll go over that disgrace of a book with you page by page until even you have enough.

I some time ago completed the rough draft of a book ~~that~~ <sup>that</sup> deal with what ~~Beschloss~~ <sup>that</sup> Beschloss quote you used suggests. The title is Make the Watchman.

On page 3 of your enclosure you refer to a senior CIA official noting objections to a curious order from his superiors to Mexico City to prevent the interrogation of a woman you do not name. I'd like to ~~see~~ <sup>see</sup> that. If it refers to Durya, it was the Mexico City CIA that got the locals to interrogate and beat her up. *If it was Genko de Paz she was worth less.*

You are quite wrong, and this underscores your subject-matter ignorance despite what you write me, in saying that there can be no "final judgement" on whether there was a conspiracy "until the CIA and the FBI release all the relevant information in their possession." This makes you what you condemn, a conspiracy theorist. The official fact is available. You have ignored it chasing those theories and besmirching yourself with the LaFontaines. ~~no~~ spell their name in their book La Fontaine. That you can say this tells me you have not read my NEVER AGAIN! I have the documents on which the beginning is based.

If I did not want you not to hurt yourself more than you have, and I include

in this ~~my~~ professional hurt, I'd not have written you at all. There was no undoing what you had done. Writing you did me no good. It took time of which I <sup>now</sup> have so little from what I do want to do and have been doing as diligently as is not possible for me at 83, enfeebled and having been hospitalized twice this year for congestive heart failure, for a total of six weeks.

You ~~have~~ and are familiar with Oswald in New Orleans. Ask yourself how you did not, and why you did not ask me about what they wrote about what I wrote in it. As yourself also when you know me why you did not ask me about what they wrote about New Orleans and about Oswald there. Can it be other than that you did not want to ~~have~~ <sup>have</sup> any doubt cast on what you wanted to believe so much?

Was not that alone unprofessional of you?

I did not exaggerate in telling you how dishonest, how inaccurate, the La Fontaines are.

And it is not possible to exaggerate how utterly removed they are from the fact of the JFK assassination- the official fact that is beyond reasonable question.

You are not even aware of the existence of that fact, are you?

Sincerely,

*Harold*

My typing has deteriorated to where when I can I let what I've typed wait overnight in the hope of catching most of the errors. <sup>and</sup> This, your attitudes have lingered in my mind. What you are insensitive to is that you take the position, without being aware of it, that what is wrong for the government is right for its critics, or that it is wrong for the government to lie to the people but right for the La Fontaines and those who support their ignorance and lies to lie to the people.

You also believe that because you have not taken the time to learn the meaning of the officially established fact that officialdom lied about (and I do not use the word "lie" too much when there are such lies as I refer to) others should compromise, forget the truth for what you refer to as a consensus. Reach a consensus on the irrelevant? On lies? On fabrications? On the end product of literary whoring with our history-and future and present?

We had a coup d'etat. Any presidential assassination has that effect but this one seems to have had the intent, too. As I said above, before I despatched and at book length I considered that. I am also the first member of my family born into freedom-ever. So, aside from what I believe is the obligation of all citizens I believe I owe something in return for what became mine with the accident of my birth. What I owe includes not compromising truth on this, as important an issue as our society can face.

How I begin ~~NEVER AGAIN!~~ is documented beyond reasonable <sup>my</sup> questioning. There was a de facto official conspiracy on the highest level to designate Oswald the lone assassin almost the minute he was killed and not to investigate the crime itself. The crime itself was never investigated. All that was done was what could be done to make as much of a case as possible for Oswald as the lone assassin. In the course of this some of the truth could not be avoided. So, it was omitted and lied about. The actual official evidence is that Oswald could ~~Not~~ have been the assassin and the assassination itself was beyond the capability of any one man. I've published this, with the names of those who did wrong, and in more than 50 years I have yet to get a letter or a call from any one of them protesting that I was unfair or inaccurate in what I wrote about him.

You'll find no smoking gun in any documents to be released because there was no official investigation of the crime itself.

~~and~~ those writing about this "new" evidence are ignorant of the "old" evidence and make mistakes if we assume only the best intentions. Thus you will find in Newman's Oswald and the CIA, which does not connect them at all, that Castro was behind the assassination. There is little less likely than that! How Newman gets there is also quite incorrect. It was a great disappointment to me.

When there is, as there is, truth on this, for me there is no compromise with truth, and that is what the consensus you seek is.

I established some of this truth in court. I used a means of my own to do that. I faced nonstop <sup>FBI</sup> lying, often perjury, in those FOIA cases. Instead of responding with lawyer's arguments and pleading I stated under oath that the FBI agents were perjurers. That made perjury most material. If I lied I was a perjurer, and I was facing those who do the charging. I was not once charged with perjury, even with error. Putting your head on the block is not an everyday way of establishing truth but it is one that makes compromising on the truth more difficult. For me, on this, impossible. (Not the only risk I ran.)

If you believe what Newman wrote about Oswald, which is all wrong, I can see how it could tempt you to credit the La Fontaines. Newman <sup>my</sup> also did no checking. I can't continue this forever but I did a little. You may recall that I was impressed by what you wrote about what he said to the Conyers committee and through you got in touch with him. Invited him up for that Thanksgiving. He and his wife came. He just sat and gave ~~th~~ me the eye until after we ate. He said little. I was not unaware and was amused. It told me that in intelligence he was never a spook. He'd not have been that obvious. But I kept telling him things I thought could interest him. Including the correct number attributed to Oswald as some kind of agent. It was not and Rankin knew it was not S178, a number Lonnie Hudkins made up. It was 110669.

I took him into my office and told him I'd made a copy of that record for him. I then discovered that it and about <sup>of</sup> two inches of that Oswald file drawer had been stolen and <sup>there</sup> is no doubt who and for whom because nobody else had access to it. So I told John how he could get it at the Archives. He called me the first working day in excitement. He'd found it where I said and it said what I said!

I also showed him the official proof that as a Marine Oswald had CRYPTO security clearance, suppressed from all assassination records. I started to make a copy for him and he insisted that I not bother, that he'd get it for himself. As you may recall my office is small and the distance between that file cabinet and our copier is not much more than a yard.

Anyway, you did not see the correct number attributed to Oswald in his book. Nor that Oswald had that high security clearance. TOP SECRET was a prerequisite.

Did not either belong there. Not both, really?

Especially when you consider that the number is consistent with CIA numbering and not with the FBI's.

Official documentation of Oswald having that kind of clearance and ~~it~~ it is not an essential in Oswald and the CIA?

With all the records I have that I let others have free Newman left without one, refusing any, and was never back to look at any of the other records all can have.

# The Washington Post

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15 November

Dear Harold,

Spare me your abusive tone. You and I have a disagreement. If you care enough to discuss it with me, don't begin by stating as a matter of fact that I am an idiot. Your ~~tone~~ tone, all too common, among JFK researchers, contributes nothing to public enlightenment and actually strengthens the forces of secrecy which you have so savagely battled for so many years.

Now on to your specifics: Yes, I believe the Elrod story; when you cease your insulting, condescending, patronizing abuse, I will take the time to explain why. I would be delighted to do so. But only if you treat me with a modicum of respect. I would preface this remark by saying that if the Elrod story surfaced as a result of your work, I would not be the least surprised and will strive to make sure that you get full credit.

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and immature personal attacks on me,

You do use the word 'lie' much too carelessly. You accuse me of burying the truth about the Kennedy assassination, a gross disservice to the only working journalist in the nation's capital who is up to speed on the latest document releases (and a gross overestimation of my influence). All because you and I disagree about the interpretation of approximately 5 percent of the evidence.

So listen up Harold. I'm your friend, an ally, a supporter, a sympathizer, an admirer. Don't treat me like shit. It's stupid of you: let's try this. Instead of getting into an argument, let's get into agreement. Write me ten propositions about Kennedy's murder that all citizens of good will can agree on. Then I'll give you ten of mine and we'll keep going until we can't come to any consensus. It will, in any case, be a much more pleasant correspondence than this.

With best wishes  
 S. P. Merby

## Toward a JFK Consensus

by Jefferson Morley

After 33 years the discussion of the Kennedy assassination is stuck, hopelessly immobilized between the myth of the "lone nut" and the myth of conspiracy. The huge accumulation of facts about November 22, 1963 amounts to something more than trivia but less than historical truth. Consensus, after a third of a century, remains elusive.

Indeed, since the bitter debate around Oliver Stone's conspiratorial epic, "JFK," in 1992, the very idea of a consensus history of the Kennedy assassination has sounded quaint. In general, the notion that one version of history can suit all parties concerned has become embattled since the cultural convulsions of the 1960s. In the particular case of the murdered president (which seemed to usher in that era), what possible telling could possibly satisfy all? Most Americans are convinced or suspect there was a conspiracy; most of the leading opinionmakers in news media organizations assure us that there is no evidence of such. And never the twain shall meet. Or so holds the pessimistic tenor of the times.

To seek an assassination consensus, say the tough-minded partisans who have dominated the JFK debate for years, is a fool's errand. The conspiracy theorists (or the government's apologists), are emotionally and intellectually incapable of accepting the overwhelming evidence of Oswald's sole guilt (or the existence of conspiracy). So why bother?

We should bother because of the undiminished centrality of Nov. 22, 1963 in the American imagination. The Kennedy assassination is a factor in the crisis of legitimacy that now undermines the U.S. government's ability to address a wide variety of public ills. In 1964, the first year that the government failed to offer a convincing account of the president's murder, 76 percent of the American people had a great deal of confidence in their government; in 1996, the figure is 19 percent. The inability of the government to present a plausible explanation of how Kennedy was killed is not the only nor the most important reason for this decline. But it surely has played a role. Forging a consensus about the causal chain of events leading to Kennedy's murder would be an important symbolic step towards restoring faith in American democracy.

We should *not* bother with a JFK consensus

because the hypothetical persons complicit in President Kennedy's murder are a menace to democracy today. This is the paranoid position. It invites the uncommitted to agree that they are menaced by unseen forces. Paranoia might have been a highly plausible feeling. But, with the end of the Cold War, assassination paranoia, like assassination secrecy, is hard to justify, especially as the event itself recedes ever father into memory.

This is not to assert that there was or wasn't a conspiracy. On that question, final judgment should be reserved until the CIA and the FBI release all the relevant evidence in their possession—which they still have not done four years after Congress passed a law mandating full disclosure.

It is to say that, if there was a JFK conspiracy, its participants are far less of a threat to the American people in 1996 than the power arrangements that allowed them to escape detection for three decades. The American public doesn't need a "smoking gun" on the assassination to know that unaccountable intelligence agencies are capable of subverting democracy. When CBS News pollsters found that 49 percent of people surveyed in 1993 said they believed the Agency was involved in the Kennedy assassination, they are not weighing in with finely-tuned assessment of the evidence about

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what happened in Dealey Plaza. They are using the Kennedy assassination to dramatize their suspicions of the most secretive components of the national security bureaucracy.

The reaction of most Washington commentators to the popular fears evoked by Kennedy's murder is to conclude that the American people are slightly paranoid, irrationally suspicious of their government, misled by demagogues. Opinionmakers across the political spectrum who agree on nothing else, agree that continu-

ing interest in the Kennedy assassination is the sign of a misguided mind. This view is particularly strong in East Coast media organizations. From retired Washington Post editor Ben Bradlee to CBS anchorman Dan Rather; from conservative columnist George Will to liberal scribe Anthony Lewis, from the late leftist muckraker I.F. Stone to the right-wing philosopher William F. Buckley, there is widespread unanimity: no sensible person really believes there was a JFK assassination conspiracy.

By contrast, the West Coast media elite (i.e., Hollywood) is more in step with public opinion. Stone's "JFK" is but one of a generation of feature films that portray the hidden hand of undemocratic forces lurking behind the facade of official history. In the 1993 film "In the Line of Fire," Clint Eastwood played a Secret Service agent haunted by his own failure to react quickly in Dealey Plaza. Decades later, he finds himself taunted by another would-be presidential assassin, a renegade CIA "wet boy" played with malicious zest by John Malkovich. He may be a "lone nut" but Eastwood learns that the CIA bears institutional responsibility for his training. This rumination on the legacy of November 22, 1963 in the guise of a multiplex action thriller was a huge hit.

In the face of seemingly immutable popular suspicions, it is noteworthy that major media organizations have devoted so little effort to reviewing and assimilating the 1 million pages of CIA documents related to the assassination that have been made public since Stone's movie. Or the 2,000 documents declassified in the last two years by the JFK Assassination Records Review Board. There is much of interest in this material. For example, there is a large body of documents on a still-unidentified senior CIA official who just days after the assassination wrote a memo for the record noting his objections to a curious order from his superiors to the CIA's Mexico City station to *prevent* the interrogation of a woman who had contact with Oswald. Why would CIA officials, with the country still reeling from Kennedy's death, seek to block questioning of someone who had contact with the accused assassin? That interesting question could be profitably directed to this official, who it is now

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## Consensus...

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known is still alive and living in a foreign country—if some news organization were interested.

The media coverage has been a personal disappointment to me, as I have tried and failed to develop a sustained interest among my colleagues at the Washington Post in it. My colleagues did generously help me in publishing three pieces (one in the Style section and two in the Outlook section) about the research of retired U.S. Army major John Newman and Dallas investigative reporters Ray and Mary LaFontaine. I added what I believe to be a scoop: the first on-the-record interview with a CIA official who handled information about Oswald before the assassination.

I hoped that this material would stir further discussion with my colleagues. Alas, they were less intrigued than I and there was no discussion of its implications. More than one sympathetic senior colleague let me know that my interest in writing about the Kennedy assassination wasn't doing my career any good. I have no reason to doubt their good intentions. I just believe that as long as the government is keeping secret documents related to the Kennedy assassination, journalists should continue to pay close attention.

Media commentary around the assassination since the movie "JFK" has featured mostly conspiratorial scenarios that lack all credibility (like the recent jailhouse video from yet another self-confessed Dealey Plaza gunman) and dismissals of the whole subject with ritualistic ridicule of Oliver Stone. More nuanced assessments are ignored.

Take, for example, the findings of Evan Thomas, the Washington bureau chief of Newsweek in his recent book about the CIA, "The Very Best Men." Thomas, a well-known chronicler of the Washington establishment and no conspiracy theorist, presented an in-depth portrait of four top CIA officials in the '50s and '60s. He laid out the sometimes curious actions of top CIA officials before and after Nov. 22, 1963 and added a variety of interesting details not previously known. He concluded that "there is no evidence that the CIA itself was sucked into an assassination conspiracy," which exculpates CIA officials while tacitly acknowledging the very real possibility that others—not institutionally affiliated with the CIA—might have per-

petrated a conspiracy. Thomas's judicious formulation can certainly be debated, but it is defensible and reasonably formulated—a proposition can help build consensus.

The paranoid stance of many JFK conspiracy theorists is less helpful. Indeed, some commentators find the paranoid style of assassination buff to be a menace to democratic society—and a less hypothetical one that the crowd on the grassy knoll. They have a point. The conspiracy theorists who traffick in JFK speculation (e.g., the chauffeur did it, the three tramps did it, Jimmy Hoffa did it, the Freemasons did it) have trivialized history. They have played fast and loose with the evidence. They have recklessly impugned the reputations of people who assuredly had nothing to do with the assassination. They have undermined the more serious work of independent researchers like Harold Weisberg and the late Sylvia Meagher who, along with the House Select Committee on Assassinations, took on a recalcitrant Executive Branch and helped assemble, what all serious journalists and historians now agree, is the real historical record of the assassination.

Most regrettably, the conspiracy theorists, by grounding understanding of Nov. 22 1963 in self-referential emotions (like paranoia and self-righteousness), have helped confound consensus. They have reinforced, if inadvertently, the cynicism and sense of personal helplessness that characterize American public life today. And they have propelled plenty of intelligent, decent people into the embrace of the "lone nut" mythologists. After all, the partisans of Oswald's sole guilt offer a more soothing proposition to those who recall the shock of November 22, 1963: The murder of the president and his accused assassin, (they say) were events which no one, save the wretched Oswald and the thug-gish Jack Ruby, were responsible. For the minority of people who still want to think well of Executive Branch agencies and the media, this is a more satisfactory position than reckless conspiracy mongering.

The majority of the American people though remain stranded. The average, skeptical citizen—concerned but not crazy, interested but not obsessed—has no reason to be satisfied with the state of the Kennedy assassination story. The

notion that Oswald acted alone has lots of high-level validation but little persuasive power. The notion of dirty tricks around Kennedy's murder has plenty of persuasive power but little official validation. Without resolution, this state of public confusion is a recipe for cynicism.

Those seeking a JFK assassination consensus hope that some basic principles can clarify this key episode in American history.

First, the party of consensus rejects the simplistic "conspiracy vs. lone nut" paradigm which both the tabloids and the mainstream media habitually use to frame the JFK debate.

Rather, we emphasize the complexity of history. There is no longer any disputing that Lee Harvey Oswald suddenly became a figure of keen interest to a small group of senior CIA officials in the months before the assassination. Win Scott, the head of the CIA station in Mexico, said so in a chapter of an unpublished memoir suppressed by the agency until 1993. Jane Roman, the retired senior CIA counterintelligence officer whom I interviewed in 1994, told me the same thing. A wide variety of long-suppressed CIA documents confirm it. Thus the gunfire in Dealey Plaza, *no matter who perpetrated it*, represented an extraordinary failure in national security intelligence gathering and dissemination. The decision-making that led to this failure—and key aspects of the CIA and FBI's post-assassination investigation of it—remain cloaked in secrecy.

Second, we seek to forge a common understanding of Kennedy's death that unites, not divides, the American people. We begin with the judicious conclusion of diplomatic historian Michael Beschloss, that "the most likely explanation for the cause of Kennedy's death lies in his policies." Therefore we seek the fullest possible documentation of the Kennedy administration's policies, particularly covert policies aimed at overthrowing Castro, the CIA and FBI's knowledge of the persons involved in these covert policies who were in Dallas in late 1963 and their contacts with Oswald.

Third, we are interested in evidence, not theories. We strongly support the efforts of the JFK Assassination Records Review Board (AARB), created by Congress to review and

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## Consensus...

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declassify virtually all of the government's records on the subject. We hope to encourage more and better news media coverage of the declassification of government files on the assassination. The scheduled release of long-classified information this fall on certain CIA-funded Cuban exile groups and on the Dallas gun dealer who may have sold ammunition to Oswald could be significant.

Fourth, the party of consensus believes that the paranoia and secrecy that have clouded public understanding of the assassination can only be dispelled with education. The journalistic statesmen who tend to dismiss interest in the JFK assassination are, for most part, unfamiliar with the new evidence that has emerged in the last three years. Their lack of interest, while regrettable, cannot change or eliminate what is available to the public nor does it seem to have much affect on public interest which remains high.

There is still much work to be done to catalog and analyze this new evidence but the grounds for consensus are now emerging. The story of the Kennedy assassination and the mystery that has surrounded it for 33 years is *not* a tale of an immense and monolithic conspiracy. Nor is it simply the tale of a lone nut. Rather it is a chapter in the history of the Cold War, a cautionary tale for the next generation of Americans about the perils of secrecy in a democracy and the power of a people who won't settle for anything less than the truth. ■

*Jefferson Morley is an editor in the Outlook section of the Washington Post.*