

Route 12 - Old Receiver Road
Frederick, MD 21701

January 7, 1979

Mr. Richard Cohen
The Washington Post
1150 - 15th St. NW
Washington, DC 20005

Dear Mr. Cohen:

Your today's column self-portrays an authentic American monster, the bastard of journalistic intellectual incest.

It is a confession of personal journalistic incompetence, extended to the entire press.

It makes sport of the deepest and most dangerous subversion possible in any representative society.

It seeks to ridicule concerned and responsible inquiry with an indiscriminate if not libelous guilt-by-nonassociation in "a cast of fruitcakes and weirdos, conspirators with teeth capable of receiving radio transmissions from distant planets and poor devils with bugs implanted in their brains by the CIA."

In your world there are only "conspiracy buffs" and "us anti-conspiracy types."
(From your column this is not adequate self-description. Flack for know-nothingism might be closer.)

By your standard there can be no truth, no establishing of fact, no journalistic responsibility, indeed no system of justice because "There is just too much evidence to deal with" and because you appear to be unable to distinguish between nonsense, insanity and self-promotion and fact:

"There is just too much evidence to deal with, too many books to read, too many contradictions and all of it wrapped up in politics and personalities ..."

None of this is truthful. It represents the abdication of your responsibilities as well as that of the press in general.

Is there nothing but conspiracy buffery or anti-conspiracy buffoonery when a President is assassinated? Of what is there "too much evidence?" Of the crime itself or of the nuts made into something they are not by those with purposes to serve thereby and columnists with space to fill?

Why don't you back up a bit, look at what you have written and published and ask yourself whether or not it isn't a defamation of the reportorial mind as well as of the unmentioned few who have conducted responsible inquiry without conspiracy theorizing - hardly the Epsteins and Lanes of whom you have written.

Ask yourself if there is not an American means of establishing truth and fact, as for example in courts of law, and what you have done to learn before ordaining the hopelessness of it all when a system of society is turned around and then its basic institutions fail to perform - or worse, whitewash and cover up.

Ask yourself also what qualifies you to represent either that Lee Harvey Oswald was indeed the assassin or that there is no evidence other than the acoustical bearing on whether or not there was a single assassin. Surely not Epstein's book, which played it safe and presumes guilt, despite your contrary suggestion.

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Do you really believe that man's mind is capable of conceiving getting to the moon and then getting men there and back and yet remains incapable of deciding what is factual and what is not about a homicide relating to which there is tangible evidence? (Whether or not the Richard Cohens trouble themselves to examine it or the Washington Posts to publish it.)

Two sentences make your column comprehensible: "I like a man who says 'sireen.'
It smacks of authenticity."

Q.E.D.



Harold Weisberg

RICHARD COHEN

For Conspiracy Buffs, It Isn't Much Conspiracy

MY COPY IS 12 YEARS old now and the name written in it, although mine, does not seem to be in my handwriting. I remember buying it and jamming it into my suit jacket and taking it with me one day on assignment with an older, more senior reporter—a baggy-pants character right out of a bad movie. He asked me what I had in my pocket and when I produced it he made a face and called it communist propaganda. It was Edward J. Epstein's book, "Inquest," and its cover asked the question: "Is one of the murderers of John F. Kennedy still on the loose?"

We argued that day, I and the older reporter, and it was clear that already people were taking sides. You either believed the single assassin theory of the Warren Commission or you did not and there seemed to be nothing one side could do to convince the other. I moved from camp to camp, finally bedding down with the Warren Commission and then, with a sense of relief, refused to deal analytically any more with the issue. It is one of those arguments that we will never settle—like a college argument on the nature of love.

Lately, though, the other side has been scoring points. Out of a cast of fruitcakes and weirdos, conspirators with teeth capable of receiving radio transmissions from distant planets, and poor devils with bugs implanted in their brains by the CIA, come two certified acoustical experts, Mark Wales and Ernest Aschkenasy, to say that their

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tests prove "beyond a reasonable doubt" that a second gunman took a shot at President Kennedy that tragic day in Dallas. The shot came from the infamous grassy knoll, a spot holy to the conspiracy-minded who have always claimed that another gunman did indeed lurk there. This was enough, apparently, to allow the House Select Committee on Assassinations to conclude that "President Kennedy was probably assassinated as the result of a conspiracy."

It was enough to give us anti-conspiracy types a rough moment. This, after all, was evidence, the significant finding, to say the least, a time to reconsider why you believe what you believe. The fact of the matter is that I no longer know why I believe what I believed. Some of it had to do with the nature of the people on the other side and some of it had to do with the horrible implications of conspiracy—what if the CIA had done it?—and some of it had to do with the fact that there is just too much here to handle. Somewhere in this mess of evidence and fact a person has to take a stand.

In this sense, the Kennedy assassination is like the Hiss case. There is no settling it, no putting it to rest, no proving anything. There is just too much evidence to deal with, too many books to read, too many contradictions, and all of it wrapped up in politics and personalities—in positions snipped out at a time when they might have made some sense. It is not too much to say that even if Alger Hiss confessed his guilt, admitted he lied, it would not be enough for some. A book would appear exonerating him.

Somewhat the same thing applies to the infamous gap on the infamous White House tapes. I, for one, believe that Richard Nixon took those tapes

and stayed up all night, erasing and erasing—a copy of Popular Mechanics with instructions on how to erase at his side. I commend Rosemary Woods for being a stand-up gal and for posing for the year's most obscene picture, but I know who erased that tape and no evidence is going to change my mind. I don't want any confessions, either, thank you. This is one mystery it's a joy to live with.

The same is true with the Kennedy assassination. I have learned to live with it, to accept the contradictions, to draw my conclusions on the basis of the bulk of the evidence—to say, in other words, that no hard evidence in the conspiracy means no conspiracy. All that was shattered by the acoustics test and by the House committee statement that there was a conspiracy.

But then, as in the Hiss case, time came to the rescue. There, on the dear old Walter Cronkite Show, was the very Dallas policeman himself saying it could not have been his motorcycle radio that recorded that fourth shot. Nope, he said, shaking his head and talking in the accent taught to all motorcycle policemen. He was sure. There would have been "sireens" and I, for one, believed him. I like a man who says "sireen". It smacks of authenticity.

So we are back more or less to square one. Nothing has been proved, nothing much disproved. Someone like me would say that the committee did not turn up a conspiracy. The committee itself says it did. Even so, it's not much of a conspiracy, certainly not the one involving the CIA, the FBI and the mob and bearded sharpshooters from Cuba that conspiracy buffs had led us to believe existed. This is, instead, a conspiracy between Lee Harvey Oswald and someone like him — Oswald Harvey Lee. Make up the name. It's a clone of the same man. He allegedly fired the shot that never hit if he fired it. If he was there. If the motorcycle was where it was supposed to be. If the cop remembered where he was 15 years ago. It's possible.

I remember where I was 12 years ago. I was arguing about the Kennedy assassination with a baggy-pants reporter.