

Livingstone's new JFK book lacks clear thesis

By John Newman

The principal problem with "High Treason 2" is the difficulty the reader has trying to make out its thesis. In his latest book on the JFK assassination, Baltimore resident Harrison Livingstone takes for granted a high-level government conspiracy. Various motives for the murder, including escalation in Vietnam, are tacked on at the beginning and end for context. The meat of this book, however, revolves around what happened — or did not happen — to President Kennedy's body after the shots rang out in Dallas.

The book lacks a clear-cut laying down of its propositions, theses and main evidence up front. Mr. Livingstone tends to present all of his own views as facts, and explains away all points where others disagree — including his own interviewees — as "mistakes." After a few hundred pages, one begins wondering more about Mr. Livingstone's agenda than about the Kennedy assassination.

"Maybe I'm being watched," he says early in the book. "So what? We have to learn to live with a lot of things. I don't blame the watchers. I'd want to watch a guy like me too."

Mr. Livingstone sees himself as a great helmsman in a sea of lies and manure. "My job is to chart a course through for us," he says, "and lately I have come into new and unknown waters in this investigation, where I feel close to discovering the real and simple truth . . ."

HIGH TREASON 2.
Harrison E. Livingstone.
Carroll & Graf.
420 pages. \$22.95.

Interestingly, though, his first book, the best-selling "High Treason," is not listed in the bibliography. This is especially odd because he mentions it several times in the text. He does so, without giving any credit to Robert Groden, the co-author of that first book. Evidently the two men now have deep antipathy for each other.

The main target of Mr. Livingstone's ire in "High Treason 2," however, is David Lifton, author of "Best Evidence." Mr. Lifton, whose name appears once in the text, is actually present throughout the work but only as a masked man called "others," "researcher" or "author." Mr. Livingstone spends as much time trying to discredit Mr. Lifton's theories as he does establishing his own.

Mr. Lifton argued in his own work that by the time JFK's body reached the autopsy table in Bethesda, it had been clandestinely removed from its casket and medically forged. He explained the autopsy report as an honest description of a body altered prior to the autopsy.

In "High Treason 2," we can be sure Mr. Livingstone does not like Mr. Lifton's thesis, but less sure of what he himself is saying.

He apparently does not think the

body was removed from the casket, but he does establish points where it could have been. He thinks that the doctors at Bethesda saw the same wounds as the doctors in Dallas and that the X-rays and photos were forged in Bethesda. We are never sure if the president's wounds are being altered because Mr. Livingstone himself is not sure it is Kennedy's body in the X-rays and photographs.

Mr. Livingstone sees the forging of the body as occurring during the autopsy. Thus he has the Bethesda doctors as participants in the plot, and tells us that these doctors "may have actually or figuratively had a gun at their head . . ."

"High Treason 2" does contain some important new direct quotations from medical personnel. For example, researchers will find interesting many passages that are from new interviews with Bethesda X-ray technician Jerrol Custer, Bethesda doctor James Jenkins and others. The Kennedy assassination, however, remains complex, and in the end, Mr. Livingstone is unsuccessful in establishing his own theories or in destroying Mr. Lifton's.

Moreover, this book is not well written and is extremely hard to read in places. The publisher acknowledged to this reviewer that Mr. Livingstone showed up with a partial manuscript last October and wanted it to be published by December, apparently to take advantage of Oliver Stone's movie, "JFK." Carroll & Graf agreed to publish by March of this year, and it shows in the editing.

Still, as Mr. Carroll himself explained, "We knew we had an audience and we knew we could get to them, and so we did it. We think it was a correct decision." Indeed it was. "High Treason 2" went straight onto the best-seller list.

For all but the most devoted followers of Harrison Livingstone, this work will probably produce little praise among assassination researchers. One reason is his self-serving and condescending style. He says, "Along the way I was initiated into the deeper mysteries of life, so to speak. I am not interested in being part of the scavenger crowd."

Mr. Livingstone's own swan-song statement is most revealing: "This is my historical statement and one last spurt of research on my part, and that's it for me. I have to go back to life, much as I care about the cause." Since when was the search for truth not a part of life? Apparently Mr. Livingstone sees his research on the assassination as part of a reality separate from life, and on that point he is quite right.

Mr. Newman is the author of the recently published book "JFK and Vietnam."

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