

A Thousand Plots

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The American male can no more abstain from fantasy than he can close his eyes to a pretty girl tripping by. And indeed the clod who has no imagination is a terrible bore.

This being the case, it should hardly surprise anyone that a legend with a thousand different plots is sweeping America like bingo a generation ago. It is that John, the Good, an American version of Baldur, the beautiful god slain by the wiles of the evil Loki, was assassinated by a terrible conspiracy. This conspiracy supposedly shakes the pillars of power and involves names only whispered in corners.

The plots are gaudy with mystery, and the stage is left as full of bodies as a Shakespeare play.

Taxi drivers, bankers, serious-minded professors, practical politicians talk of this conspiracy incessantly. A few days ago, the head of a highly-respectable research organization drew me aside to whisper his theory, and it had its own bizarre angle.

The legend, despite its variations, has several central thoughts. One, President Kennedy did not want to go to Dallas, had an uneasy feeling about the city, but was pressed by his vice-president to make the trip. Johnson wanted Kennedy to act as a peace-maker between the two warring factions of Governor Connally and Senator Yarborough.

Second, the assassination was not the work of a single madman, but was an intricate plot involving high officials. One version makes this a gangland killing, with Lee Oswald the patsy, and presumes two snipers were used. The second blames Cuban emigres angered by the President's refusal to send American ships and planes to help out the Bay of Pigs invasion. A second marksman figures in this theory, too. Another believes

the murder was by Communists and/or a foreign power.

Third, Jack Ruby knew Oswald and was himself strangely involved in the conspiracy. This is a dressing up of the almost instant mass reaction that Oswald was killed to hide the true facts. Fourth, a number of persons, as many as 10, who "knew something" of the assassination have met their deaths unexpectedly and mysteriously.

A psychologist and politician scientist would find in these legends an astonishing fact - that Americans generally are willing to believe that the Authorities have lied to them, have taken part in a diabolical plot and are capable of resorting to murder on a wide scale to cover up the facts. This is a condemnation of Authority so vast as to shake the base of society.

This represents a considerable shift of the public mood. In 1923, when President Harding died, there were a few rumors that he had been poisoned to cover up scandals that were breaking out all over his administration. But there was nothing like the scope and intricacy of the Kennedy assassination legend. A number of books have been written, some quite respectable people here and abroad seriously question the accuracy of the Warren Commission, and a Gallup poll shows that less than a majority of Americans believe the official version. The Gallup study shows two percent suggesting that Kennedy's successor was involved in the "conspiracy." No one ever hinted that Calvin Coolidge had anything to do with Harding's death.

The immense growth of the legend indicates such mistrust and suspicion with those in power that great and even shocking political changes will take place within the decade. Shocking because a demagog could exploit this suspicion, needing little else, and become President.