

*A Report by Tad Szulc*

The Warren Commission in its Own Words

# THE NEW REPUBLIC

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## The Ghost Will Not Rest

The Warren Commission, appointed by President Johnson to investigate the assassination of his predecessor, John F. Kennedy, finished its study and published its 27-volume report 11 years ago this week. Claiming that it and its staff had examined all available evidence and leads, the Commission concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald, psychologically troubled and acting alone, had killed the President. It also found, then, nothing to support the hypothesis of a conspiracy to assassinate Kennedy. In this, its considered judgment was fully consistent with that of the FBI and other intelligence agencies.

The Commission, composed of seven politically eminent and powerful men, hoped that the results of its deliberations would be accepted by the American people as the full and final truth. But a shadow of doubt has always hung over the investigation: the murders of Martin Luther King, Jr. and President Kennedy's brother Robert in 1968, even the attempted assassination of Gov. George Wallace, fed the suspicions. Though not in the context of the Kennedy assassination, various revelations implicating both the FBI and the CIA in criminal activity, on their own and in association with gangsters, fired the imagination of the doubters. During the last decade, moreover, a cohort of "assassination buffs" has developed a body of material poking holes in the Commission's work here, establishing alternative explanations there. The ghost of John Kennedy, it seems, simply will not rest.

Gradually the National Archives declassified and made available to public scrutiny a mass of Warren Commission raw materials that are not part of the original report; the most interesting of these items were released last March and April. What is in the Archives has received far less attention than it deserves. The mass of information does not in itself refute the Commission's ultimate judgment about Oswald's responsibility for the crime. We do not have suppressed evidence pointing to another killer.

Nonetheless the materials we have examined point to a hitherto unrevealed, but tortured and antagonistic relationship between the Commission and the FBI. This 10-month struggle, the study below indicates, gravely distorted the investigation in various ways. Only now, for example, do we know that the FBI concealed from the Commission that 10 days before the assassination Oswald wrote the

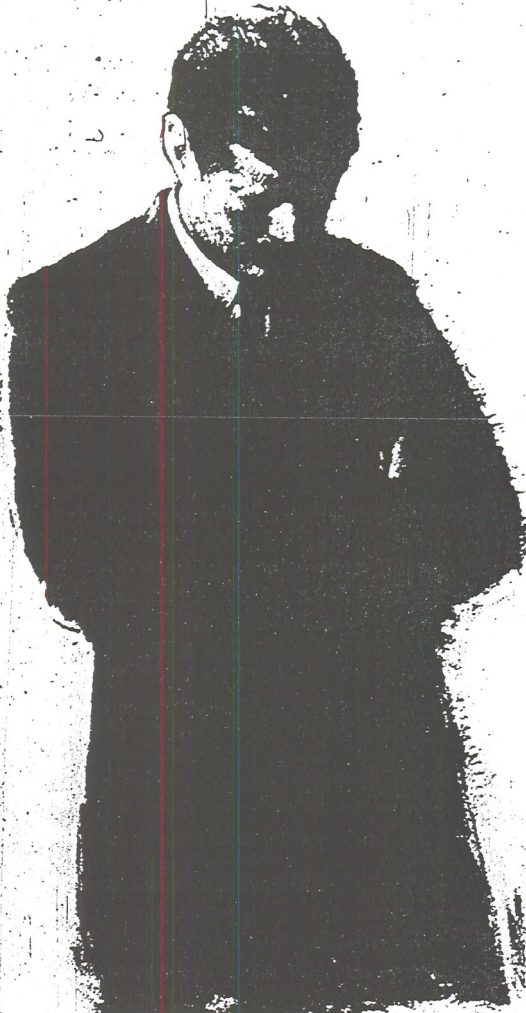
bureau threatening to blow up the Dallas police station. Not only did the FBI fail to inform the Commission, but it destroyed Oswald's letter.

Moreover the Commission's published record is not a complete and accurate account of what the Warren panel had been told. A case in point is the sketchy and ambiguous quality of its inquiry into the life and associations of Jack Ruby, the presumed assassin's killer. We have not tried to follow this tantalizing trail. Among the documents now available, however, are the bulk of the transcripts of the panel's executive sessions. Two of these transcripts remain classified, inevitably raising corrosive but reasonable speculation as to why any transcripts of a Commission, which concluded the assassin to be a disturbed individual uninvolved with political conspiracies or government agencies, need be kept secret at all. But what we have read constitutes an internal history of the Warren Commission, its ambivalences and torments, its outrage at being stamped into preordained judgments—and *this* is disturbing enough.

We asked Tad Szulc, one of our contributing editors, to do his own report on these transcripts. We devote the bulk of this expanded issue of *The New Republic* to his analysis and annotated text of the Warren Commission proceedings and related matter from the Archives. That is followed by a postmortem on the Commission by Associate Editor Eliot Marshall, based on interviews with some of the surviving principals. All of this makes, we think, gripping reading. We understand that the words of the Commissioners, self-assured men of the world involved in what may have been the most traumatic undertaking of their careers, are likely further to undermine public confidence in their work.

The question is, then, whether the investigation should be reopened now. It is possible, though, that the trail is now already cold, covered over by death and history and the contrivances of men anxious to protect their professional reputations or perhaps even to disguise their complicity in the great crime.

We would feel more comfortable if we were certain that following the injunction of Justice Brandeis—to pursue "truth even unto its innermost parts"—would at this late date be a very rewarding undertaking. It may well be that others, ferreting out stray and fugitive clues, will be persuasive that another inquiry is absolutely essential. There are many responsible people, in public life and out—some with relevant information and others with intuition—who are convinced that a fresh investigation is called for. If this were clearly to meet the claims of justice and conscience, we would be eager that it happen. Perhaps those claims are now so great that only a new examination of the case will satisfy the American people. But nations, like individual men and women, must learn to live with mystery and doubt, which means also that sometimes the most terrible truths are beyond knowing.



Study for Portrait of President John F. Kennedy by Aaron Shikler,  
Courtesy of Davis and Long Company, New York.