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Guy Wright



We Prefer A Conspiracy

Most Americans secretly hope a conspiracy is discovered behind the assassination of President Kennedy. We don't want to believe Lee Harvey Oswald did it alone.

That flicker of low-voltage enlightenment came to me as I read the news from New Orleans, where District Attorney Jim Garrison says he has found evidence of a conspiracy and expects to start making arrests.

All across the nation, people sat up expectantly, hopefully, at that revelation.

Just what sort of conspiracy do we hope is found? On that we are by no means clear. But virtually any conspiracy, no matter what can of worms it opened, would be preferable to accepting a nobody like Oswald as the lone killer.

That is too pointless. It robs the President's death of dignity and offends our sense of drama.

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WE REJECT the lone killer hypothesis not because it strains belief. On the contrary, it is altogether too true to life:

Behind the assassination of Lincoln was a half-baked plot by a handful of eccentrics, but McKinley was shot by a demented fanatic, and Garfield by a disappointed office-seeker.

From Gandhi to South Africa's Verwoerd, assassination by crackpot is the rule rather than the exception.

So it isn't the precedent of history that makes us want to reject the lone assassin theory. It's our esthetic pre-

conditioning.

Movies and mystery novels have taught us that behind an event so momentous as the assassination of a President there should be someone other than a bit-player like Oswald.

And so the announcement from New Orleans inspires more than curiosity or openminded willingness to pursue the facts. It arouses a desire to believe that amounts to a national need.

This need is what has kept Mark Lane and the other professional doubters in business. It is what draws people to the theater to watch a below-the-belt satire like "Mac-Bird."

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IF A CONSPIRACY existed, what sort of conspiracy was most likely?

In the brief hours after Kennedy was shot and before Oswald was arrested there was an almost unanimous assumption that Southern racial bigots were to blame.

When Oswald's pro-Communist connections came chattering over the teletypes, the reaction in our newsroom was a surprised, "Well, I'll be damned."

Cuban refugees, who have been working with the New Orleans DA, predict his investigation will reveal Fidel Castro as the mastermind.

But a French journalist who was interviewing Castro when news of the assassination reached him reported he was visibly distressed, saying it would mean a harder American policy toward his country.

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ANOTHER POSSIBILITY, albeit a wild one, is that Oswald somehow became the dupe of anti-Castro Cuban refugees, who were sore at Kennedy for not sending American troops to the Bay of Pigs.

Accept Oswald as a dupe, and the variations become endless, with everyone from Maoists to the Ku Klux Klan pulling the strings.

But in the present mood of the public, the nature of the conspiracy is secondary to the national desire for assurance that one existed.

Underlying much of our unrest today is a feeling of unfinished business at Dallas.