

## A Word About Lee Harvey Oswald

Editor's Note: November is indelibly associated with the assassination of President Kennedy, and the fall is normally the period when major new books and articles are timed to appear. Because May marked what would have been John F. Kennedy's 90th birthday, however, several notable new books appeared last month, including Vincent Bugliosi's *Reclaiming History*, David Talbot's *Brothers*, Burton Hersh's *Bobby and J. Edgar*, and James Piereson's *Camelot and the Cultural Revolution*. ([Reclaiming History](#) has already been reviewed for *The Wall Street Journal* and this website, and *Brothers* will be reviewed here in July).

Despite the unanticipated burst of attention, one aspect of November 22<sup>nd</sup> remains glossed over: the motivation that drove Lee Harvey Oswald to commit political murder. *Washington DeCoded* is pleased to publish a new essay by the journalist and author who knew Oswald best, and wrote one of the lamentably few reliable books about the assassin of President Kennedy.

*By Priscilla J. McMillan*

After decades of speculation about a grassy knoll, the Zapruder film, and an acoustical tape, the man behind it all is too often overlooked. Lee Oswald was not a cardboard figure but a human being, and although he had barely turned twenty-four at the time he killed President Kennedy, he had a motive.

Oswald was a believing Marxist, and his motive was to strike the deadliest blow he could imagine at capitalism in the United States. Oswald had been headed that way most of his sentient life. He had, by his account, become seriously interested in politics at fifteen or sixteen, when someone on a street corner in the Bronx handed him a leaflet about Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who had been executed two years earlier as spies for the Soviet Union. At eighteen, huddled in his Marine Corps barracks in Japan, he studied Russian from a Berlitz phrase book. And at nineteen, he wangled a hardship discharge from the Marines and made the arduous journey by steamship and train to the USSR.

Arriving there as a tourist, he immediately proclaimed to Russian authorities and officials of the U.S. embassy in Moscow that he intended to relinquish his U.S. citizenship and become a citizen of the USSR. It was at that moment in his life, November, 1959, that I happened to meet and talk with him.

I was a reporter for the North American Newspaper Alliance in search of a human interest story and he had just marked his twentieth birthday. I had no way of knowing that this boy dressed in a dark gray suit, white shirt, and dark red tie—he looked like an American college student—had, two weeks earlier, slashed his wrists in his hotel bathtub in a gesture of desperation after being informed by Soviet officials that he could not remain in the Soviet Union. Throughout our conversation, which took place over several

hours in my room at the Metropole Hotel, I asked Oswald why he was [defecting](#) to the USSR, while he tried to engage me in a discussion of Marxist economics.

When I asked what would become of him if he returned to the United States, he replied that his lot would be that of “workers everywhere.” He would be ground down by capitalism as his mother, a practical nurse, had been. He spoke bitterly of racial discrimination in the United States, but did not disclose that as a schoolboy he had taken action against it by riding in the black section of the segregated buses of New Orleans.

While I realized that Oswald was angry at the country he was hoping to leave behind, I also sensed that his desire to live in the Soviet Union had something theoretical about it. He had traveled thousands of miles to get there, but had ventured no more than two blocks on his own and preferred to sit by himself in his hotel room rather than go sight-seeing in Moscow. So far as I could see, his enthusiasm for the Soviet Union was based on neither knowledge of, or curiosity about, everyday life there.

The Russians refused Oswald’s plea for citizenship but allowed him to remain in their country. He, whether from anger at the way he claimed to have been treated by U.S. consul Richard E. Snyder, or from desire to leave himself an “out,” refused to return to the American embassy to reclaim the passport he had left behind.

In early 1960, a couple of months after I met him, Oswald was sent to the provincial city of Minsk and given a job at the Minsk Radio Plant. There he distinguished himself as a below-average worker, but embarked on an eight-month romance with a woman named Ella German of which he seemed to be proud. But Ella jilted him, and Oswald, to spite her, married nineteen-year-old pharmacist Marina Prusakova. Her friends and his co-workers quickly taught him the daily realities of Soviet life.

His disenchantment with the poverty, lack of amusement, and ubiquitous spying can be found in what he called his “Historic Diary” and in “The Collective,” an essay he started to write in the USSR. After less than two years in Minsk, Oswald opened a correspondence with the once-hated U.S. consul, Richard E. Snyder, in Moscow, seeking to return to the United States. Snyder’s superiors in Washington determined that, having left his passport at the embassy that angry autumn of 1959, Oswald had retained his citizenship.

In June, 1962, he was allowed to return to America, bringing Marina and their three month-old daughter, June. That summer and fall, and throughout the following winter, he held a series of menial, disheartening jobs, first repairing houses in Fort Worth, then as apprentice at a printing plant in Dallas. Oswald’s criticisms of the society around him returned with a vengeance, and his reading of two left-wing publications, *The Worker*, mouthpiece of the U.S. Communist Party, and *The Militant*, newspaper of the Socialist Workers Party, helped focus his discontent. Oswald said of *The Militant* that “you can see what they want you to do by reading between the lines.”

That winter the two newspapers were filled with diatribes against the far-right John Birch Society and a like-minded figure, Major General Edwin A. Walker (Resigned, U.S. Army), who happened to live in Dallas. Although Oswald was barely able to feed his family, he nonetheless ordered two guns by mail, a revolver and a \$19.95 Mannlicher-Carcano rifle with a scope. On a Sunday afternoon in late March, 1963, he had Marina photograph him in their Dallas backyard holding both guns and copies of *The Militant* and *The Worker*. Ten days later, on April 10, 1963, Oswald fired a shot at General Walker that missed Walker's head by only an inch or two. And a few days after that, Oswald, his pistol strapped at his waist, told Marina that he was going to "have a look" at former Vice-President Richard Nixon, who he said was in Dallas that day. Marina managed to keep him at home, and when Oswald subsequently announced that he meant to leave Dallas and seek a job in New Orleans, she was relieved, thinking that he might get over his obsession with politics there.

She was wrong. Within days of his arrival in New Orleans, Oswald was standing on the docks, handing out "Fair Play for Cuba" leaflets. New Orleans, despite what Marina hoped would be the restraining influence of his cousins and aunt, proved to be no more salutary than Dallas. Oswald read books about Mao Tse-tung, John F. Kennedy, and Fidel Castro that he found in the public library, and spent the long summer evenings sighting his rifle on the porch, and working the bolt action. He explained to Marina that he wanted to go to Cuba to teach Fidel's army how to repel an American invasion. And he sketched out his newest scheme. He would hijack an airplane headed to Florida and redirect it to Cuba. While he was in the cockpit, she was to stand at the rear, holding June with one hand and pointing Lee's pistol at the passengers with the other, and together they would join Fidel.

Marina was alarmed by this latest "crazy" scheme, but succeeded in laughing Lee out of it. Go to Cuba if you must, she said, but do it a legal way. And so, in late September, 1963, he boarded a bus to Mexico City, where he attempted to secure entry visas for Cuba and the USSR. After failing on both counts he returned, crestfallen, to Dallas, where Marina was expecting their second child, having been taken in by a generous couple, Ruth and Michael Paine.

Oswald's intentions were now a jumble: that fall he wrote to the Soviet embassy in Washington, requesting visas for Marina and June to enter the USSR. As Marina was to analyze it later, he meant to stash his family in Russia and then travel by himself to China, to see whether Communism there was less bureaucratic and closer to the ideal than the Cuban or Soviet varieties. But things worked out differently.

Oswald found a job at the Texas School Book Depository and lived by himself in Dallas while Marina and the children (their second daughter, Rachel, was born in October) lived with the Paines in the nearby suburb of Irving. On weekends Oswald would come to visit.

A new political vista opened for Oswald on Tuesday, November 19. That day he spotted a story in either the *Dallas Morning News* or *Times Herald* that described the

parade route of President Kennedy's upcoming visit to Dallas. The presidential motorcade would be passing directly by the windows of the Texas School Book Depository. The precise moment when Oswald made up his mind is not known, and never will be, but the first external manifestation of what he was thinking occurred on Thursday morning, when he asked a co-worker, Buell Wesley Frazier, for a ride home after work. Frazier was accustomed to giving Oswald a ride to Irving on Fridays, but thought nothing of this change in plans.

On departing for work Friday morning, Oswald left behind his wedding ring and nearly all the money he had. He brought to work the rifle he had originally purchased for the purpose of killing General Walker, but unlike the previous April, this time he did not miss his intended target. At almost exactly 12:30 CST, he fired [three shots](#) and assassinated the embodiment of the American polity he despised.

Everything in Oswald's life proclaims that this was a man prepared to take dangerous and dramatic action for the sake of his political beliefs. Joining with others in street demonstrations or precinct work were not for him. He wanted no part of the "system." To the contrary, he wanted to bring it down. He considered himself a "Marxist" or a "Socialist." He was attracted to socialism in Cuba and the USSR, but repelled by the bureaucratic reality. And despite his disappointments with both, by the autumn of 1963 he was still hoping to find the Socialist paradise in China.

The possibility that Oswald's political convictions may have played a decisive part in his shooting John Kennedy was downplayed in the early sixties because President Johnson and other officials did not want the assassination to become a *casus belli* with the Soviet Union. And to the public, this explanation, at a moment when capitalism was riding high, appeared ludicrous. Besides, for a Marxist, killing this president appeared wildly inconsistent. Kennedy was a liberal. Shooting at him, unlike the attempt on General Walker, appeared to conflict with Oswald's beliefs about racial discrimination and better relations with the USSR.

But to Oswald the believing Marxist, it did not matter much whether the president was liberal or conservative. What mattered was that he was leader of the greatest capitalist nation on earth. Oswald wanted to decapitate capitalism as he, almost literally, decapitated the president of the United States. Seen in this light, an observation by Marina, the person closest to him at this period of his life, makes perfect sense. Had her husband survived to be tried for the president's murder, Marina believed, not only would he have confessed—he would have *boasted* about what he had done and proclaimed that it was all for the Socialist cause.

Oswald did not succeed, of course, in bringing down American capitalism, any more than Timothy McVeigh succeeded in sparking a national uprising when he bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City. But Oswald's act of violence indisputably ushered in an era of unease and suspicion in American life that was not there prior to the Kennedy assassination.

## Washington Decoded

Oswald was not responsible for all of the damage that has befallen American society since 1963, much as he would have wished to be. Some of that damage is the result of events related only tangentially to the assassination of President Kennedy. But some of the injury can, with justice, be attributed to conspiracy theorists who have gone to superhuman lengths to avoid facing the truth.

They have constructed wildly-implausible scenarios, far-out, fictitious “conspirators,” and have scandalously maligned the motives of Kennedy’s successor, rather than take a hard look at the man who actually did it. They have, ironically, done more to poison American political life than Lee Oswald—with the most terrible of intentions—was able to do.

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