

## The JFK Files: Cuba, Kennedy, and the Cold War

By Max Holland

Just when you thought you deserved a respite, here comes the thirtieth anniversary of the Kennedy assassination. More than 450 books and tens of thousands of articles have been published, and numerous documentaries and feature films produced, about November 22, 1963. Yet this anniversary will yield a bumper crop of offerings in every medium.

The persistent disbelief attached to the *Warren Report*, the ceaseless re-examinations, have to be grounded in unfinished business, some yearning that goes well beyond narrow questions such as whether all pertinent government documents have been released. In a letter to *The New York Times*, William Manchester skillfully identified this unrequited need last year. The author of *The Death of a President* wrote:

There is an aesthetic principle here. . . . If you put the murdered president of the United States on one side of a scale and that wretched waif Oswald on the other side, it doesn't balance. You want to add something weightier to Oswald. It would invest the president's death with meaning, endowing him with martyrdom. He would have died for *something*.

A conspiracy, of course, would do the job nicely.

If great events demand great causes, as Manchester argues, thirst for a conspiracy will never be slaked. As he stands, Oswald is unequal to the task of assassinating a president who, fairly or not, is sometimes rated higher than Abraham Lincoln or Franklin Roosevelt. But perhaps this anniversary ought to be an occasion to re-examine that imbalance, if possible, adjust the scales, and make the assassination coherent. In addition to marking thirty years, this November is the first major anniversary since the geopolitical rules changed and exaggerated passions and fears abated. Its more than possible that our understanding of the assassination, like so much else, has been obscured by cold war exigencies. New documentary evidence, not only about the assassination but also about Kennedy's Cuba policy, has been released, and principal officials are talking, some after a long silence.

In his first *Weekly* published after the assassination, I.F. Stone wrote a passionate and piercing column on the fallen president entitled "We All Had a Finger on That Trigger":

Let us ask ourselves honest questions. How many Americans have not assumed--with approval--that the CIA was probably trying to find a way to assassinate Castro? How many would not applaud if the CIA succeeded? . . . Have we not become conditioned to the notion that we should have a secret agency of government--the CIA--with secret funds, to wield the dagger beneath the cloak against leaders we dislike? Even some of our best young liberal intellectuals can see nothing wrong in this picture except that the "operational" functions of

[the] CIA should be kept separate from its intelligence evaluations! . . . Where the right to kill is so universally accepted, we should not be surprised if our young president was slain.

Drawing a rhetorical, unproven connection between the cold war mindset and Oswald's stunning act was vintage Izzy Stone. With virtually every American still in shock, it took a journalistic dissenter to hold up the assassination against a backdrop of political violence contributed to by the United States. In retrospect, I.F. Stone was closer to understanding the context of the assassination than almost anyone at the time.

The full story is a bipartisan one. The Eisenhower administration was hardly shy about subverting unsympathetic Third World regimes, and uncounted soldiers and civilians died during CIA-backed shadow wars and coups in the 1950s. But ostensibly adverse trends apparent in 1959 raised a new question: If thousands of deaths were acceptable, why not the murder of particular persons? It might be a less costly way to nip unfriendly regimes in the bud or oust a pro-Western but repressive ruler who might engender a Communist takeover. "Executive action," the assassination of actual or potential leaders deemed inimical, was added to the CIA's bag of covert tactics. In fragmented and frequently violent Third World polities, executive action appeared quite feasible, the rewards worthwhile, the risks tolerable.

In 1960, four political murders were authorized as elements of wider covert operations designed to influence outcomes in the Congo, Iraq, the Dominican Republic and Cuba. The respective targets were Patrice Lumumba, Abdul Karim Kassem, Rafael Trujillo and Fidel Castro, who was a quarry of special urgency. If Castro's radicalism succeeded, the administration believed, Cuba promised to become a model for other Latin American revolutionaries and a bridgehead for Soviet subversion in the Western hemisphere. A major Soviet operational base and intelligence platform in America's backyard was Washington's worst nightmare.

Kennedy required little convincing about the need to act with similar dispatch. During the 1960 campaign, he had suggested that Castro's rise to power was a symbol of America's decline under Eisenhower. And uprooting Castro's Cuba while simultaneously preventing another one in this hemisphere was to be a centerpiece of Kennedy's foreign policy from the moment he took office. Kennedy was also highly enamored of the CIA's proven ability to bend events in countries like Iran and Guatemala, and covert operations were in keeping with the action-oriented prosecution of the cold war he favored.

"Neutralizing" Castro was only one element, of course, in a far larger effort to land Cuban exiles in the spring of 1961 and foment a counterrevolution. But the Bay of Pigs invasion was an utter debacle and left Kennedy livid over the embarrassment caused his infant administration. As significant, Castro was no longer simply an enemy inherited from Eisenhower, and Kennedy became adamant about getting rid of him. As then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara later testified, the administration was "hysterical about Castro at the time of the Bay of Pigs and thereafter."

In the wake of this rout, the president toyed with the idea of replacing Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles with Attorney General Robert Kennedy. Instead, he ordered RFK, his most trusted confidant and adviser, to poke around the agency and find out what had gone wrong. Operating with his usual zeal, Robert Kennedy immersed himself in agency affairs, and as he came to understand the CIA's capabilities he emerged its most ardent champion.

By November 1961 the covert effort to eliminate Castro resumed in earnest. Code-named MONGOOSE, the campaign aimed to destabilize Castro's regime rather than to overthrow it suddenly. Every possible tactic would be brought to bear, including hostile diplomacy, a trade embargo, paramilitary sabotage, psychological warfare, and assassination. President Kennedy installed his brother as a kind of czar over the entire, uniquely compartmented operation, in effect the unofficial but unmistakable overseer of the CIA's Directorate of Plans with respect to Cuba, the covert action shop then run by Richard Helms. As Senator Harris Wofford (then a White House aide) wrote in his 1980 book, *Of Kennedys & Kings*:

The attorney general was the driving force behind the clandestine effort to overthrow Castro. From inside accounts of the pressure he was putting on the CIA to "get Castro," he seemed like a wild man who was out-CIAing the CIA.

For the first nine months of 1962, MONGOOSE was the administration's top covert priority and Castro practically a fixation for Robert Kennedy. At one of the first meetings, he told the assembled officials that his brother "really wanted action" and that "no time, money, effort, or manpower is to be spared." Robert Kennedy made field trips to MONGOOSE facilities in Florida, and if a sabotage raid was scheduled he insisted on knowing such unimportant details as what sidearms the exiles would be carrying. His micro-management extended to almost daily telephone conversations with Helms, during which Kennedy applied "white heat" pressure.

Although MONGOOSE did not envision U.S. military intervention until an internal revolt erupted, this distinction was lost on Castro. He found a sympathetic ear in Nikita Khrushchev. Initially, the Soviets had been wary of supporting Castro. He was not a card-carrying member of the Cuban Communist Party when he rode into Havana, and the Kremlin doubted his staying power. But a combination of factors persuaded Khrushchev in 1962 to order a Soviet military buildup in Cuba.

Nothing about the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis need concern us except the end-game. In its wake, some Kennedy advisers advocated trying to wean Castro from the Soviets because he was smarting over their "betrayal." Ultimately, however, a modest program of covert subversion was put into place in 1963. As before, it included the goal of eliminating Castro. And though it strains credulity, plotting Castro's demise in 1963 was at once the most sensitive secret in Washington and the most talked about. Because Helms operated directly under Robert Kennedy, even the CIA chief who replaced Dulles, John McCone, was in the dark.<sup>[1]</sup> Yet simultaneously, as I.F. Stone hinted, doing away with Castro was a favorite topic at Georgetown dinner parties.

By late 1963, Castro had been the target of almost a dozen assassination attempts. Several had varying degrees of CIA involvement, while Cuban exiles acting independently were responsible for the balance. All the attempts were plagued by informers, incompetence and Fidel's plain good luck.

Still, Castro did not like the odds. On September 7, 1963, he gave a three-hour interview to the Associated Press during a reception at the Brazilian embassy in Havana. Largely devoted to vehement denunciations of U.S. policy and its maker, Castro included a pointed comment about assassination plots. "United States leaders should think that if they are aiding terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders, they themselves will not be safe," he warned.

A leading newspaper in New Orleans, the *Times-Picayune*, was among the U.S. papers that picked up Castro's unusual interview with an American wire service. His warning was the lead paragraph in a four-column, page 7 story on September 9. In all New Orleans, no one was more likely to be interested and believe in what Castro had to say than the city's most ardent supporter of the Cuban revolution, a 24-year-old ex-Marine named Lee Harvey Oswald.

Ascribing a political motive to Oswald doesn't hinge on whether he read one newspaper article, though in all likelihood he did. Because of his politics he was extraordinarily sensitive to the hostile U.S. policy toward Cuba, as author Jean Davison painstakingly pointed out in *Oswald's Game*, an undeservedly neglected biography published in 1983. In a profound sense, Oswald was only marginally less informed than, say, John McCone, about the furious effort to overthrow Castro. Diplomatic attempts to isolate Cuba--such as throwing it out of the Organization of American States in 1962 were a matter of public record. So was the trade embargo, tightened considerably by Kennedy in 1961 and again in 1962. The Bay of Pigs proved U.S. antipathy went well beyond conventional containment, while MONGOOSE and subsequent operations generated a lot of "noise" in the press, particularly in the left-wing periodicals Oswald devoutly read. Anyone who monitored Radio Havana, organized his very own "Fair Play for Cuba Committee" chapter and marched around New Orleans with a placard that read "Viva Fidel!" and "Hands off Cuba!" was aware of all this.

Of equal moment, by mid-1963 Oswald had twice demonstrated the psychological capacity to commit life-threatening acts. The first act occurred in 1959, when he slit his left wrist after the Soviet government initially refused to accept him as an important defector. The second, even more suggestive incident, occurred in the spring of 1963. Oswald had returned to America in June 1962, having left the Soviet Union because it turned out to be no better than his homeland. But in his own mind he remained a committed Marxist, with a decided taste for self-spun intrigue and drama. Upon his return Oswald moved to Dallas, coincidentally the home of one of the most outspoken American opponents of Communism, Edwin Walker, a former Army general. Walker had resigned in November 1961 after distributing John Birch Society literature to U.S. troops in West Germany. He had subsequently chosen Dallas as the most appropriate command post for anti-Communist speaking tours and other right-wing activities. The Cuban

missile crisis had given an extra boost to Walker's already prominent profile, and in February 1963 the Dallas media were full of stories about his decision to join evangelist Billy James Hargis in "Operation Midnight Ride," a five-week national tour dedicated to fighting Communism.

Oswald put Walker under surveillance after these news stories appeared, and in late March ordered a rifle through the mail under an alias. Over the next few weeks he quietly stalked the general. When the Mannlicher-Carcano weapon arrived, Oswald's wife, Marina, took the infamous picture of Oswald posing with rifle in hand; he was "ready for anything." On April 10, he attempted to assassinate Walker as the general sat in his living room, working on his taxes. The next morning Oswald turned on the radio fully expecting to hear that Walker was dead. He was still alive. Oswald was only sorry that he had missed.

That summer Oswald moved with his wife and daughter to New Orleans to make a fresh start. There his concern for Castro became all-consuming. Cuba was the embodiment of Communist ideology, the truly revolutionary country. And for the first time in years, his political efforts brought him the attention he thought he deserved all along. Oswald started his "Fair Play for Cuba Committee" chapter, forging signatures to make it look like the chapter had more than one member. He leafleted and walked the streets of New Orleans with his "Viva Fidel!" placard, and to his immense satisfaction, a local TV news show aired his protest for two minutes. He was even arrested for getting into a fracas with an anti-Communist Cuban, Carlos Bringuier, whose group he had tried to infiltrate days earlier.

In September, the *Times-Picayune* published Castro's denunciation of U.S. policy and his warning. It was one of the most prominent news articles then published about renewed U.S. hostility to Cuba after the missile crisis, but far from the only one. Oswald developed a new impulse--he had to get to Cuba immediately to help defend the revolution. He arranged to send his family back to Irving, Texas, and on September 25, left for Mexico City and the Cuban consulate there.

Oswald presented himself as a "friend of Cuba." But justifiably suspicious of all Americans--especially one who appeared unstable--the Cuban consul refused to issue a visa. Oswald returned to Dallas on October 3, embittered at not immediately being recognized for who he truly was. After two weeks he got a job through a friend of Marina's as an order filler at the Texas School Book Depository. By now, Dallas newspapers were full of daily reports about the impending visit of President Kennedy to Texas. While the president's itinerary was still sketchy, an opportunity for another violent act was slowly forming itself. When the precise route of the motorcade was published on November 19, Oswald, having failed to kill Walker, was "suddenly faced with the possibility of having a much greater impact on history," as Gerald Posner writes in his book, *Case Closed*.

What finally catalyzed Oswald into action is impossible to prove. But in the two earlier instances when he actually took violent action--as opposed to imagining or talking about

it--his proximate motive was manifestly political. When he acted out his internal demons violently, it was on a political stage. Nor was his drive to be recognized as a revolutionary capable of daring acts inconsistent with his desire to prove his importance to family and friends. In fact, they must have seemed terrifyingly reinforcing. All his life was a rehearsal for this moment.

Call it a tragic demonstration of the principle of unintended consequences. Or as journalist Daniel Schorr later put it, "an arrow launched into the air to kill a foreign leader may well have fallen back to kill our own." As Lyndon Johnson announced the formation of a presidential commission to investigate the assassination, no one had more reason to suspect this awful truth, and be burdened by it, than the slain president's brother.

Making sense of the assassination requires making the aftermath as coherent as the act itself. Clearly, the Warren Commission is the most difficult aspect to come to terms with. On the one hand, President Johnson created the commission with an express mandate to get to the bottom of the assassination. It was headed by then-Chief Justice Earl Warren, whose reputation for probity was nearly unblemished, and several commissioners were singularly versed in intelligence and national security affairs, notably Allen Dulles and John McCloy. On the other hand, a decade after publication of the *Warren Report*, it became known that government officials who had pertinent information had purposely and willfully deceived the commission.<sup>[2]</sup> Is it possible to square this circle, and still arrive at the same basic finding as the Warren Commission?

First, the logic of those officials who withheld critical secrets must be understood. From their perspective, nothing about the assassination--neither the magnitude of the national trauma nor the commission's mandate--superseded normal CIA procedures. Plausible deniability and compartmentalization of information still applied to the plots against Castro as well as to other authorized, ongoing covert activities directed against his regime. If the commission were to demonstrate an unambiguous need to know about the assassination plots, the question of what to do would have to be faced. But until and unless that happened, pertinent information was never going to be volunteered.

The CIA would have faced a genuine dilemma only if the withheld information pointed to someone other than Oswald, or someone acting in concert with him. The Warren Commission could not deliver to the American people and the world, as its fundamental finding, a false conclusion. But if the withheld information proved congruent with the finding that Oswald was a lone assassin--and it only bolstered that conclusion--the agency had every reason to adhere to its ingrained practices.

Consequently, the CIA was quite cooperative about responding to specific requests submitted by the Warren Commission staff. On more than one occasion it volunteered information the commission was unaware existed but had a demonstrated need to know, even if the information came from such highly secret means as eavesdropping or mail intercepts. And when a KGB lieutenant colonel named Yuri Nosenko defected in early 1964 with important testimony about Oswald's (non-existent) links to the KGB, the

commission was thoroughly informed.<sup>[3]</sup> But Richard Helms, who was both knowledgeable about the anti-Castro plots and the highest-ranking CIA official in close contact with the commission, refused to volunteer anything else. At times, he even deflected commission staff from leads that threatened to get into sensitive areas. As Helms later explained to a Congressional committee, he did not believe that the plots were “relevant” to the commission’s inquiry.

When the *Warren Report* was published in September 1964, it presented a portrait of the assassin as a resentful loner: Oswald, though highly politicized, acted upon inchoate feelings of alienation but without acute political reason. Absent his confession, and denied insight into an important part of the equation by the CIA and others, the commission staff had decided that it could not ascribe to Oswald “any one motive or group of motives.” The report gave ample details about Oswald’s political activities but in a detached, clinical manner. In the end, he was left to become Manchester’s wretched waif: a callow hater trying to elbow his way into history by striking out at a president who had it all--looks, youth, and power. Not untrue, and perhaps the commission had little alternative. But the explanation rings hollow given Oswald’s extraordinary political beliefs. As staff member (now Ohio state judge) Burt Griffin later remarked, “The fact that we could not come up with a motive for Oswald was a great weakness in the report.”

What did Robert Kennedy, who remained attorney general throughout, do while the Warren Commission conducted its investigation? As David Belin, a counsel to the commission, recounts in his book, *Final Disclosure*, the chief justice personally wrote Kennedy in June 1964, informing him of the commission’s progress and asking him if he was aware of “any additional information relating to the assassination” of his brother “which has not been sent to the Commission.” In particular, Warren emphasized the importance of information bearing on the question of a domestic or foreign conspiracy.

When Kennedy responded, he was no more forthcoming than the CIA. All the information in the possession of the *Justice Department* (emphasis added) had been sent to the commission, Kennedy wrote, which was a restrictive interpretation of Warren’s request and inaccurate anyway, since Kennedy knew the FBI was aware of some of the plots against Castro. RFK went on to say that he had “no suggestions to make at this time regarding any additional investigation which should be undertaken by the Commission prior to the publication of its report.”

Kennedy’s outward mien during these months comports with what might be expected of a man tortured by knowledge that he, almost alone, carried. William Manchester reports that many in the Kennedy clan were crushed by the assassination, then righted themselves after the funeral. But during the spring of 1964, a “brooding Celtic agony . . . darken[ed] [Kennedy’s] life.” What genuinely sent him reeling? The “tragedy without reason” of his brother’s death, as RFK’s biographer, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., put it? Or was it the death, topped by the shattering realization that somehow the Kennedys’ fixation on Castro had inadvertently motivated a political sociopath?

Belin provides a suggestive answer in *Final Disclosure*. He recounts a conversation with John McCone in 1975, after news of the assassination plots finally surfaced along with Robert Kennedy's knowledge of those plans. As Belin describes,

McCone replied that for the first time, he could now understand the reactions of Kennedy right after the assassination when the two of them were alone. McCone said he felt there was something troubling Kennedy that he wasn't disclosing, although they did have a close relationship. . . . [It was McCone's] belief that Robert Kennedy had personal feelings of guilt because he was directly or indirectly involved with the anti-Castro planning.

If the CIA is to be blamed for lying by omission to the Warren Commission, then certainly Robert Kennedy deserves similar censure. He helped prepare the stage for later revelations that condemned the *Warren Report* to disbelief.

Given all this, how should the commission and its 888-page final report be remembered? Can the deficiencies be put into perspective, and the Warren Commission given its due? The fact is that no information that has come to light since 1964, when carefully examined, leads to any conclusion other than the one the commission drew. If the word "conspiracy" must be uttered in the same breath as "Kennedy assassination," the only one that existed was the conspiracy to kill Castro and then keep that effort secret after November 22.

Initially, the *Warren Report* reassured the American public in 1964. After its release, 56 percent of Americans believed Oswald was the lone assassin, largely because of the widespread praise the report won in the media, including from this magazine. Over the next three decades, however, belief in the report fell dramatically.

Like the assassination itself, the *Warren Report* could not exist apart from history. General acceptance of its conclusions was susceptible to revision, especially as Americans' general attitude toward the federal government underwent a sea change. Over a period of ten years, the Vietnam War and Watergate turned the public's attitude from one of trusting predisposition into skepticism. Watergate then spawned a wave of investigations that finally touched theretofore sacrosanct security agencies. Press revelations forced Congress to launch its first genuine investigations of the FBI and the CIA. Eleven years after the *Warren Report*, Senator Frank Church's Select Committee revealed the extent of anti-Castro covert operations, including the assassination plots, and the no less damning fact that the FBI and CIA had withheld relevant information from the commission.

It is hard to overestimate the impact of these findings. The notion that the CIA had dissembled in the midst of a national trauma was incomprehensible to Americans not schooled in the niceties of compartmented information and the "need to know." If the government could lie to itself in this situation--let alone to the public--then anything seemed possible. The *Warren Report*, of course, had been dogged by critics since its 1964 publication. But as healthy skepticism became corrosive cynicism, a milestone in Americans' disbelief passed by, almost unnoticed. Now the burden of proof shifted decisively and unfairly from critics to *defenders* of the official story.

The difficulty of parsing the truth was compounded by a new round of historical dissembling and denial. This time the exigency wasn't so much the continuing cold war but the reputation of the Kennedys. In the midst of his own hearings, Senator Frank Church floated the notion that the CIA was a "rogue elephant rampaging out of control," even though the anti-Castro operations had been under the tightest presidential control imaginable. "I will have no part in pointing a finger of guilt toward any former president," said Church. Perhaps the capstone in this effort to blur the Kennedy brothers' driving role came with the publication of Schlesinger's RFK biography in 1978. Wrote Schlesinger, "The available evidence clearly leads to the conclusion that the Kennedys did not know about the Castro assassination plots. . . ."

Given this confusion, another official inquiry into the assassination could hardly be expected to allay suspicion. Thus, it scarcely mattered when a House Select Committee, formed in 1976 to re-investigate the assassinations of JFK and Martin Luther King, Jr., corroborated every salient fact developed by the Warren Commission.<sup>[4]</sup> After a thorough exploration, the Select Committee concluded that the sins of the CIA and FBI stopped at omission (the role of Robert Kennedy being typically glossed over). Nevertheless, a Pandora's box had been opened. A *Newsweek* poll taken on the twentieth anniversary of the assassination showed that 74 percent of Americans believed that "others were involved," while only 11 percent believed Oswald acted alone.

Almost any claim or theory, regardless of how bizarre, could now be presented in the same sentence as the *Warren Report's* conclusions and be half-believed. The 1990s opened with the film *JFK*, a reprise of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's theory that Kennedy was murdered because he wanted to end the arms race and U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Hollywood is one thing, but even reputable magazines like *Tikkun* and *The Atlantic Monthly* lent some respectability to the conspiracy choir. Today, debates about the assassination resemble epistemological discussions.

One salutary development occurred as a consequence of *JFK*. In 1992, Congress passed a sweeping law that placed all remaining government documents pertaining to the assassination in a special category, and simultaneously loosened the normal classification guidelines. About 98 percent of the documents assembled by the Warren Commission were open by 1991, but 2 percent remain closed. Why? Has the government all along been hiding some piece of information that contradicts the *Warren Report*?

In fact, according to knowledgeable sources, the 2 percent doesn't contradict the *Warren Report*; like the information omitted in 1964, it only helps to affirm Oswald's sole guilt. Among the 2 percent gathered by the commission is important information derived from signals intelligence and human intelligence sources.<sup>[5]</sup> After the assassination, as Helms says, the U.S. government's immediate inclination was to wonder if the Soviet and/or Cuban governments were somehow involved. The National Security Agency (NSA), which monitors communications, went into overdrive to decipher intercepts of conversations, cable traffic, radio, and telephone communications at the highest levels of the Soviet and Cuban governments. Together with information from human sources, the intercepts showed beyond any reasonable doubt that both the Soviet

and Cuban leaders were as shocked as anyone by the news from Dallas. “They were frightened,” says one knowledgeable source, “[and] we knew that.” The intelligence community’s ability to penetrate Castro’s government was particularly impressive. Within days, it knew that Castro’s private reaction (he was being interviewed by a French journalist when the news came) was a genuine one.

Castro was aghast at the possibility of being blamed for the assassination. As important, the role these intercepts undoubtedly played in the decisions by Helms and Robert Kennedy to withhold information from the commission staff cannot be overemphasized. If no link existed between Oswald and the Soviet and/or Cuban governments, the staff had absolutely no need to know of covert operations directed against Cuba, regardless of how relevant they were to Oswald’s motivations. It was an institutionally convenient, and very human, act of denial and dismissal. The original act of disbelief, in other words, was committed by officials who disbelieved Oswald’s capacity to comprehend the full extent of U.S. hostility toward Cuba.

Anyone familiar with classification rules during the cold war will recognize why this information was and is deemed extraordinarily sensitive. The NSA’s capabilities and the methodology of its intercepts are among the most highly guarded of secrets; rightly or wrongly, information gleaned from intercepts is just as zealously protected on the ground that content inevitably reveals methodology.

Even a long essay cannot capture all the nuances of the assassination. For that, interested readers should turn to the *Warren Report* itself, or Gerald Posner’s *Case Closed*, which patiently debunks every canard subsequently posited about the assassination. Unfortunately, as admirable as his book is, Posner fails to integrate the assassination and its aftermath into history. He perpetuates the pattern of bifurcated books about the Kennedy years: those about the assassination on one side, those about the presidency on the other. His obligatory criticism of the Warren Commission includes no explanation of why the CIA lied to that body, and there is no mention of Robert Kennedy’s role. Posner misses a big point when he writes that the CIA did not keep President Kennedy “fully informed about the assassination plots.” The whole elaborate system of plausible deniability was geared to leave no evidence linking the president to such plots.

The thread common to all three acts in this drama--the events leading up to and including the assassination, the Warren Commission’s investigation and the aftermath--is clearly the cold war. Pull on that thread and primary mysteries unravel. Kennedy’s pursuit of the cold war led him to embrace policies initiated under Eisenhower, including the extreme instrument of assassination, and Castro was pursued with demented vigor. Presidential decisions provoked actions, and actions led to consequences, not all anticipated and intended.

Castro didn’t ask for a champion, but one came unexpectedly in the person of Lee Harvey Oswald, a bent personality consumed with ambition and political insight into how the cold war was being waged against Cuba. To Oswald, fair play ultimately meant

subjecting Kennedy to the same dangers plaguing Castro. Afterward, the cold war provided the exigency for withholding pertinent information from the Warren Commission, creating a near-mortal wound to its credibility when Senator Church finally revealed that one arm of government had deceived another. And cold war classifications still keep secret thousands of documents that ultimately will prove only one thing: the Warren Commission got it right. Altogether, the cold war mindset created, then perpetuated, the imbalance between Kennedy and his assassin by always denying political coherence to Oswald. When the scales are righted, John F. Kennedy tragically emerges as a martyr after all--a martyr to America's hubris, to its sense of omnipotence and immunity from consequences during the height of the cold war.

The profound costs to the Soviet Union for waging the cold war are often noted, but equally penetrating assessments of the costs to the United States are hard to find. Once Kennedy's assassination is understood as another defining event in the cold war, it becomes remarkably clearer that the costs to this country were not only economic.

Every nation is sustained by its own myths, which may occasionally collide with reality. But when a nation is gripped by a myth so divorced from reality--when some 80 percent of Americans refuse to accept their own history--that myth is enfeebling, or worse. In this instance, Americans are encouraged to feel nostalgic for a past that never was, to wax dreamy about what might have been, or to be paranoid about their own government. None of these is a rational or progressive basis for addressing problems at home, and imagining a different leadership role for America in a new world.

[1] When Helms had to tell him in August 1963 of the CIA's involvement in a Mafia plot, McCone denounced assassination as a policy instrument. Helms didn't tell him that other plots were still afoot.

[2] Dulles, McCloy, Representative Hale Boggs, then-Representative Gerald Ford, and Senator Richard B. Russell knew in varying degrees about anti-Castro operations, and Dulles, in addition, knew that assassination had been attempted. But the commission *staff* was kept in the dark, and they were the ones who researched and wrote the *Warren Report*. References to withholding information from the commission should be understood as applying to the staff only.

[3] Because his veracity was not habitual, the CIA was not then able to establish whether or not Nosenko was a bona fide defector; the FBI believed he was. Today his bona fides are beyond doubt. Nosenko's description of the KGB's attitude toward Oswald ("They didn't want him from day one") was confirmed in 1992 by *Izvestiya*, which published a four-part series on Oswald based, in part, on his KGB file.

[4] In a sudden flip-flop weeks before its release, the House report was rewritten to allege that a fourth shot was fired, thus indicating a conspiracy. The acoustic evidence for this allegation was subsequently discredited by experts; thus all the new scientific and forensic tests commissioned by the Select Committee corroborated the *Warren Report*.

## Washington Decoded

[5] The 2 percent also includes the autopsy records, Secret Service methods, Oswald's tax records, and some slanderous but irrelevant statements.