

The Key to the Warren Report

Seen in its proper historical context- amid the height of the Cold War- the investigation into Kennedy's assassination looks much more impressive and its shortcomings much more understandable.

By Max Holland

In September 1994, after doggedly repeating a white lie for forty-seven years, the Air Force finally admitted the truth about a mysterious 1947 crash in the New Mexico desert. The debris was not a weather balloon after all but wreckage from Project MOGUL, a top-secret high-altitude balloon system for detecting the first Soviet nuclear blasts halfway across the globe.

During the half-century interim, flying-saucer buffs and conspiracy theorists had adorned the incident with mythic significance, weaving wisps of evidence and contradictions in the Air Force's account into fantastic theories: Bodies of extraterrestrial beings had been recovered by the Air Force; the government was hiding live aliens; death threats had been issued to keep knowledgeable people from talking. Such fictions had provided grist for scores of books, articles, and television shows.

In retrospect the Air Force had obviously thought the Cold War prevented it from revealing a project that remained sensitive long after the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb. And such surreptitiousness was certainly not isolated. Might it provide a model even for understanding that greatest alleged government cover-up, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy? Indeed our understanding of the assassination and its aftermath may, like so much else, have been clouded by Cold War exigencies. It may be that the suppression of a few embarrassing but not central truths encouraged the spread of myriad far-fetched theories.

Admittedly there are Americans who prefer to believe in conspiracies and cover-ups in any situation. H.L. Mencken noted the "virulence of the national appetite for bogus revelation" in 1917, and more than a century after the Lincoln assassination skeptics were still seeking to exhume John Wilkes Booth's remains. The Columbia University historian Richard Hofstadter definitively described this syndrome in his classic 1963 lecture "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," later published as an essay. "Heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" are almost as old as the Republic, Hofstadter observed, as evinced by the anti-Masonic movement of the 1820s, the anti-Catholicism of the 1850s, claims about the international banking cartel in the early 1900s, and Sen. Joe McCarthy's "immense conspiracy" of the 1950s. But a recurring syndrome is not to be confused with a constant one, Hofstadter argued. Paranoia fluctuates according to the rate of change sweeping through society, and varies with affluence and education.

In the case of the Kennedy assassination, unprecedented belief in all kinds of nonsense, coupled with extraordinary disrespect for the Warren Commission, has waxed in good times and bad and flourishes among remarkable numbers of otherwise sober-minded people. Even the highest level of education is not a barrier, to judge from the disregard for the Warren Report that exists in the upper reaches of the academy. In April 1992 the professional historians' most prestigious publication, the *American Historical Review*, published two articles (out of three) in praise of Oliver Stone's movie *JFK*. The lead piece actually asserted that "on the complex question of the Kennedy assassination itself, the film holds its own against the *Warren Report*." In a similar vein, in 1993, *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK*, by an English professor named Peter Dale Scott, a book conjuring up fantastic paranoid explanations, was published by not less respected an institution than the University of California Press.

The Warren Commission's inquiry occurred at what we now know was the height of the Cold War, and it must be judged in that context. Perhaps with its history understood, the Warren Commission, instead of being an object of derision, can emerge in a different light, battered somewhat but with the essential integrity of its criminal investigation unscathed. The terrible events that began in Dallas are not an overwhelming, unfathomable crossroads; they are another chapter in the history of the Cold War.

In September 1964, when seven lawyers filed into Lyndon Johnson's White House to deliver their 888-page report on the most searing national event since the attack on Pearl Harbor, the transmogrification of the commission into a national joke would have seemed impossible. Collectively the commission represented one hundred and fifty years' experience – at virtually every level of American government, from county judge to director of Central Intelligence. Chief Justice Earl Warren's reputation was nearly impeccable after more than twenty-five years of public service, and the influence of Georgia's senator Richard Russell in Washington, so the cliché went, was exceeded only by the president's, given Russell's power over intelligence matters, the armed forces, and the Senate itself. Two other panel members, Allen W. Dulles and John J. McCloy, were singularly well versed in the most sensitive national matters, Dulles having served as CIA director from 1953 to 1961 and McCloy as an assistant secretary of war from 1940 to 1945.

For several months the commission appeared to have accomplished its mission of assuring the public that the truth was known about Kennedy's death. The American people seemed to accept that JFK's sole assassin was Lee Harvey Oswald, and the report won almost universal praise from the news media. Prior to its release, a Gallup poll found that only 29 percent of Americans thought Oswald had acted alone, afterward 87 percent believed so.

Long before the report came out, of course, nearly everyone had his or her own explanation for the events in Dallas. It was natural to try to invest the tragedy with meaning. And humans being what they are, individual biases determined people's theories. Even as the President was being wheeled into Parkland Memorial Hospital, anguished aides insisted that unspecified right-wingers were responsible, since uppermost

in their minds was the rough reception Adlai Stevenson had gotten in Dallas a few weeks earlier, when the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations was booed, jostled, and spat on by right-wing demonstrators. Dallas's long-time reputation as the "Southwest hate capital of Dixie" only reinforced liberals' inclination to blame "refined Nazis." Even Chief Justice Earl Warren, before his appointment to the commission, could not resist issuing a "blunt indictment of the apostles of hate."

But for officials whose instincts were honed by national-security considerations, the Soviet-American rivalry loomed over what had happened and dictated what immediately needed to be done. The overwhelming instant reaction among these officials was to suspect a grab for power, a foreign, Communist-directed conspiracy aimed at overthrowing the U.S. government. The assassination might be the first in a concerted series of attacks on U.S. leaders or the prelude to an all-out attack. Newly installed intercontinental ballistic missiles were capable of reaching their targets in fifteen minutes; whose finger was on the nuclear button now that the president was dead? Both the president and the vice president had traveled to Dallas, and the fact that six senior cabinet members happened to be aboard an airplane headed for Japan suddenly acquired an awful significance. The Washington-area telephone system suffered a breakdown thirty minutes after the shots were fired, and sabotage was suspected. Attention fixed on the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba as the only governments that could possibly undertake and benefit from such a heinous plot.

When Major General Chester Clifton, JFK's military aide, arrived at Parkland Hospital, he immediately called the National Military Command Center and then switched to the White House Situation Room to find out if there was any intelligence about a plot to overthrow the government. The Defense Department subsequently issued a flash warning to every U.S. military base in the world and ordered additional strategic bombers into the air. General Maxwell Taylor issued a special alert to all troops in the Washington area, while John McCone, director of central intelligence, asked the Watch Committee to convene immediately at the Pentagon. The committee, an interdepartmental group organized to prevent future Pearl Harbors, consisted of the government's best experts on surprise military attacks.

Back in Dallas, Rufus Youngblood, head of Johnson's Secret Service detail, told the president-to-be, "We don't know what type of conspiracy this is, or who else is marked. The only place we can be sure you are safe is Washington." A compliant LBJ slouched below the windows in an unmarked car on the way to Love Field, where *Air Force One* was waiting. Despite special security precautions, it seemed possible to those on the tarmac that the presidential jet could be raked by machine-gun fire at any moment. When the plane was finally airborne, it flew unusually high on a zigzag course back to Washington, with fighter pilots poised to intercept hostile aircraft. During the flight, Johnson kept in touch with the Situation Room, manned by the national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, for any sign that the Communist bloc might be exploiting the situation. Waiting for Johnson at Andrews Air Force Base was JFK's national security team – or as much of it as could be assembled.

As minutes and then hours passed uneventfully and overburdened telephone exchanges began working again, fears about a surprise attack receded. Conspiracies like the one being imagined rely on surprise and speed for success, and nothing suspicious had occurred after the assassination. Very soon the thought of a master plot seemed irrational, as William Manchester records in *The Death of a President*: “Hindsight began early. Within the next three hours most of those who had considered the possibility began trying to forget it. They felt that they had been absurd.” Still, for hours the U.S. military stood poised to deliver an overwhelming counterstrike.

Within hours the Dallas police arrested a 24-year-old Communist sympathizer named Lee Oswald, a bundle of possibilities and seeming contradictions. Now many liberals showed a reluctance to shift the blame from right-wingers to a self-styled Marxist; a liberal president being assassinated by a Marxist seemed to make no sense. Jacqueline Kennedy’s reaction upon being told of Oswald’s background was to feel sickened because she immediately sensed it robbed JFK’s death of a greater meaning. “He didn’t even have the satisfaction of being killed for civil rights,” she said, according to Manchester. “It’s – it had to be some silly little Communist.”

For security-conscious officials, however, Oswald’s arrest meant replacing one Cold War scenario with another, and the second script filled them with no less dread than the first. Undersecretary of State George Ball ordered a search of federal files as soon as the networks broadcast Oswald’s capture. Dallas authorities found pro-Soviet and pro-Castro literature in Oswald’s boardinghouse room, and frantic searches of FBI, CIA, and State Department records revealed Oswald’s defection to the Soviet Union, his recent contacts with the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City, and his one-man Fair Play for Cuba committee in New Orleans. Top officials working through the night to assemble all the pieces had to wonder if the KGB had transformed a onetime defector into an assassin or if Castro had used an overt sympathizer to retaliate against an administration plotting his downfall. As Ball told *The Washington Post* in 1993, “we were just scared to death that this was something bigger than just the act of a madman.”

The government’s leading experts on the Soviet Union doubted it. Llewellyn Thompson, a well-regarded former ambassador to Moscow, argued that the assassination lacked the earmarks of a Soviet plot. Moscow might kill defectors but not heads of state, he insisted, and would never set such a precedent. Averell Harriman, another experienced Soviet hand, agreed that Oswald was not a likely instrument of the KGB and questioned his professed Marxism. The assassination, utterly inconsistent with recent Soviet behavior, just made no sense. What could the Soviets possibly hope to achieve through such a rash act in a nuclear-tipped world? Nor was there evidence of any effort to advance Soviet interests in the wake of the assassination. As for Cuba, even the mercurial Castro was unlikely to engage in such madness. He had to know that it would put the existence of his regime, if not his revolution, in extreme danger. But past history and common sense were not sufficient to banish all thoughts of Communist complicity. More hard evidence was desperately needed to rule it out.

Over the next two days, while a nation mourned, the entire intelligence community worked to learn everything it could about Oswald and his murky, superficially contradictory activities. New intelligence reports from Mexico City suggested a link between Oswald and the Cuban government. The super-secret National Security Agency (NSA) and allied eavesdropping agencies went into overdrive to decipher intercepted conversations, cable traffic, radio, and telephone communications at the highest levels of the Soviet and Cuban governments, looking especially for unusual messages between Moscow and the Soviet embassy in Washington and between Moscow and Havana.

In about forty-eight hours the intercepts showed beyond a reasonable doubt that both the Soviet and Cuban governments had been as shocked as anyone by the news from Dallas. “They were frightened,” says one knowledgeable source, “and we knew that.” Indeed, Moscow was so uneasy over its remote link to Oswald that the Foreign Ministry voluntarily gave the State Department a KGB account of his every movement inside Russia. Not only was Castro’s surprise genuine (he was being interviewed by a French journalist when the news came), he was panic-stricken. He believed that President Johnson would send in the Marines if LBJ decided the Cuban government was connected to the assassination.

That Oswald was not the instrument of a foreign power was an intelligence coup of the first order and of incalculable interest to an unsettled public. Late on Saturday, November 23, the State Department issued a public statement declaring that there was no evidence of a conspiracy involving a foreign country. Yet revealing the intelligence sources and methods that had helped form this determination was out of the question. Cold War-era communications intercepts were prized as World War II feats of decryption, and the NSA’s capabilities were – and are—the most highly guarded of secrets. And because content reveals methodology, certain specifics of what had been learned were equally protected. The American public was told the truth but not the whole truth. It would not be the last time.

With fears of foreign involvement ebbing, a third Cold War worry began to dominate thinking among high officials – that given Oswald’s extreme views, the assassination might stir dangerous anti-Communist emotions within the body politic. Anyone who had lived through the McCarthy era knew of the domestic dangers of untrammelled anti-Communism. It could threaten the mild *détente* achieved since the Cuban missile crisis; indeed, the public might even demand that President Johnson retaliate with a show of force. Already an LBJ aide had squelched language in the original indictment charging Oswald with killing the President “in furtherance of a Communist conspiracy.” And the U.S. ambassador to Moscow, Foy Kohler, had cabled Washington on Saturday expressing his own concern over the “political repercussions which may develop if undue emphasis is placed on the alleged ‘Marxism’ of Oswald . . . I would hope, if facts permit, we could deal with the assassin as ‘madman’ . . . rather than dwell on his professed political convictions.”

This mostly domestic problem appeared manageable. But then Jack Ruby, prey to rash impulses and a murderous temper, decided to exact proper revenge. Oswald’s death

abruptly renewed the note of mystery and suspicion: Had he been killed to suppress something? Top officials considered, but eventually discarded, the notion of an elaborate conspiracy involving Ruby; if there had been one, why was Oswald allowed to live for forty-eight hours, let alone be captured? Meanwhile the need to assuage public anxiety only intensified. Johnson considered releasing detailed results from the FBI investigation ordered the night of November 22, but then dismissed the idea as insufficient. The FBI investigation itself had to be validated, though J. Edgar Hoover fumed at the suggestion. Instead an idea advocated by Nicholas Katzenbach, the deputy attorney general, gathered support within and without the administration.

Katzenbach, deeply concerned over the appearance of a relationship between the Soviets and Oswald, wanted LBJ to impanel a group of prestigious citizens to investigate the assassination, to develop and control information with possible international repercussions, and ultimately to choke off all talk about a Communist conspiracy. Johnson, keenly aware of the South's sensitivity over states' rights, at first wanted an all-Texas investigation. But long-time Washington hands and friends, including the columnist Joseph Alsop, persuaded him that a state inquiry would be considered tantamount to a whitewash. This argument struck a chord in Johnson; Texas was his home state, and the Soviet-bloc press was charging that a leftist was being made a scapegoat for what was actually a right-wing Texas conspiracy in a decadent, violent country.

The motivation for the formation of the Warren Commission, on November 29, is made clear in transcripts of 275 recently declassified presidential telephone conversations from late 1963. They show that Johnson recruited the members of the panel by repeatedly invoking the need to cut off "explosive" and "dangerous" speculation about a Communist plot. Preventing World War III might have been typical Johnson hyperbole, but the concern was real, and there were still contradictory allegations that needed to be checked out, especially Oswald's mysterious September trip to Mexico City, where he had met a KGB agent doubling as a Soviet consular officer. As Johnson told Chief Justice Warren and Senator Russell – both were reluctant to serve – "This is an question that has a good many more ramifications than on the surface, and we've got to take this out of the arena where they're testifying that Khrushchev and Castro did this and did that and check us into a war that can kill 40 million Americans in an hour."

Even the Commission's enlistment of such respected anti-Communists as Russell and then-Representative Gerald Ford (R-Michigan) did not immediately stanch the mischief and pressure Johnson feared from the right. On December 6 the House Republican Policy Committee issued a statement decrying liberals' claims that "hate was the assassin that struck down the president," saying the true criminal was the "teachings of Communism." Republican Senator Milward Simpson of Wyoming took the floor that same day to attack those who were seeking "political advantage from warping the uncontestable truth." The senator added that the murderer "was a single kill-crazy communist."

When Earl Warren welcomed the assembled commission staff on January 20, he admonished them, "Truth is our only client here," and that phrase became the

commission's unofficial motto. Ultimately, the group's massive undertaking yielded two essential conclusions: that Oswald fired all the shots that killed JFK and wounded John Connally and that there was no evidence of a conspiracy. Reaching these simple findings required a prodigious effort by many dedicated people, and it is no small accomplishment that after more than 30 years the first conclusion remains proven beyond a reasonable doubt and the second has never been challenged by any hard, credible evidence.

The only other politically sensitive question facing the commission was that of Oswald's motive and how it might be connected to his Communist beliefs and activities. How did the commission treat Oswald's politics? It's hard to re-create an earlier time and problem, but it is extraordinarily revealing to do so.

The main difficulty in divining Oswald's motive was, of course, the fact that Jack Ruby had murdered him before he could confess and explain. During 12 hours of questioning Oswald had fallen silent or lied, with that arrogance and air of fantasy peculiar to sociopaths, whenever confronted with hard evidence tying him to the assassination. No, he wasn't the man holding a Mannlicher-Carcano rifle in that picture; someone had altered the photograph to superimpose his face on another body. No, he had never been in Mexico City. No, he was in the lunchroom when Kennedy was shot. Often Oswald appeared to be baiting his interrogators and "was so smug in the way he dealt with the questions," the Dallas assistant district attorney later recalled, that "at times I had to walk out of the room, because in another few minutes I was going to beat the shit out of him myself." One of Oswald's few requests was that he be represented by John J. Abt, a New York lawyer known for his defense of leading Communist-party figures since 1949.

Lacking a confession or hard evidence like a note, the commission ultimately decided not to ascribe to Oswald "any one motive or group of motives." This non-conclusion was sound and sensible for several reasons. First, the commission viewed itself as akin to a judge at a criminal trial, with the job simply of determining Oswald's culpability and the conspiracy issue; motive was less important. Second, the issue seemed a bottomless pit. In a moment of dark humor one staff member, Norman Redlich, wrote a spoof titled the "Washing Machine Theory of the Assassination," describing how Marina Oswald's rejection of her husband's offer to buy her a washing machine had triggered Oswald's sense of failure and his need to prove his mettle by assassinating a President. There was a serious purpose in Redlich's spoof: He wanted to show that there was simply no way to pick one motive from all the possibilities. The chances of achieving unanimity among the commissioners were slim to nil, and anyways a consensus was bound to subject the report to valid, as opposed to irresponsible, criticism. Consequently, the report listed a few possibilities and concluded that "others may study Lee Oswald's life and arrive at their own conclusions as to his possible motives."

However reasonable and sound this non-conclusion was, what is striking in retrospect is how a very plausible motive was buried. Ample details about Oswald's extraordinary political activities were provided, but in a detached and clinical manner; the avalanche of facts tended to obscure a salient one. Whenever Oswald actually took violent action,

whenever he set free his internal demons, it was on a political stage. This was true when he attempted suicide in 1959, after the Soviets initially refused his defection, and again in April 1963, when he stalked a right-wing retired general named Edwin A. Walker. Walker and Kennedy had one thing in common in Oswald's eyes: their anti-Communism, especially their antipathy to the "purer" Cuban revolution that had captured Oswald's imagination. (Walker had called for "liquidating the scourge that has descended on Cuba.") The November murder was first of all an act of opportunity by a bent personality, but Kennedy was not, in all likelihood, a random victim of Oswald.

How did this de-emphasis occur? The most important factor was the cautiousness described above. The commission's task was not to promote speculation and theorizing, no matter how plausible. Another significant, if perhaps less conscious, element was the dominant role lawyers played on the commission and in writing the report. In the most trenchant criticism of the *Warren Report* ever to appear, a 1965 *Esquire* article, the critic Dwight MacDonald accepted the commission's conclusions but called the report a prosecutor's brief that failed to meet its overarching purpose, which was to produce an objective account of what happened in Dallas. Because the report was written by lawyers, Macdonald said, it had a telling defect: "omnivorous inclusiveness... [the] prose is at best workmanlike but too often turgidly legalistic or pompously official. It obscures the strong points of its case, and many are very strong, under a midden-heap of inessential facts Its tone is that of the advocate, smoothing away or sidestepping objections to his 'case' rather than the impartial judge or the researcher welcoming all data with detached curiosity." Oswald's seriousness about his politics was buried under a "midden-heap" of facts.

Yet there was also a political tinge to the depiction of Oswald. The same Cold War imperative that had led to the formation of the commission persisted as an undercurrent throughout the investigation, and it ultimately detached Oswald from the politics that had animated him. At the commission's first executive session in December, former Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles, one of the members most sensitive to Cold War considerations, gave each of his colleagues a book on the history of presidential assassinations in America. Nearly every killer, would-be or successful, had been a lone psychopath. Dulles suggested to his colleagues that Oswald fitted the historical pattern; a disturbed nonentity, in other words, purchased a mail-order rifle and used it to murder the president of the United States. Later Dulles wrote what he hoped would be an appendix to the report on the topic of presidential assassins.

The manner in which the report described Oswald's preferred legal counsel is also revealing. That Oswald had wanted to retain John Abt, or a lawyer who "believes as I believe" and would "understand what this case is all about," was a sure indication that Oswald had intended to exploit his upcoming trial as a megaphone for his peculiar brand of politics. But the report drew no meaning at all from Oswald's clear preference. All three references to Abt simply describe him as a "New York attorney" (or lawyer), not mentioning his ties to Communist-party figures.

The commission's inclination to de-emphasize Oswald's politics was mightily reinforced by another external Cold War imperative. As the staff, to its great chagrin, learned a decade later, the CIA limited its cooperation with the investigation according to its own internal rules. The agency had no intention of volunteering information about American subversion of Castro's regime, including proposed assassination plots that stretched back to the Eisenhower administration, even though Oswald may have suspected the worst about U.S. policy and been motivated by its hostility. And there was no clue that the CIA was holding back, for it did readily share some highly classified secrets, like the communications intercepts. Suspicion of the FBI actually ran far higher, because of J. Edgar Hoover's well-known predilection for holding himself above the law.

When the CIA's omissions were finally revealed in the mid-1970s, the agency was roundly pilloried by Congress and in the news media. Nothing was more devastating to the Warren Commission's reputation, nothing more "weakened the credibility of the *Warren Report*," CBS's anchorman Walter Cronkite observed. The commission's staff had grown used to bogus "new" revelations by conspiracy buffs, but this genuinely distressed and even angered them. And most Americans, unschooled in the niceties of compartmented information and the need to know, found incomprehensible the notion that the CIA had dissembled in the midst of a national trauma. Could the CIA ever be counted on to tell the whole truth about the assassination? And if the government could so lie to itself – let alone to the public – what wasn't possible?

This revelation made the Warren Commission into a national joke. For a few citizens, of course, the supposed inadequacy of the commission's investigation had been manifest as early as 1966; others had gone through a more gradual disillusionment that reflected their declining faith in government after Vietnam and Watergate. But for most, the investigation had never before come under such a cloud, except during a passing controversy over the president's autopsy that had been fairly easily resolved. Now doubts were such that even Congress felt compelled to revisit the entire matter, after fourteen years of self-restraint unprecedented for that publicity-hungry body.

When the House Select Committee on Assassinations issued its final report, in 1979, it castigated the CIA for withholding information. Yet some members of the commission must have pretty well known the CIA wasn't being entirely open. Allen Dulles had extensive knowledge about CIA workings and U.S. efforts to overthrow Castro since March 1960, including proposed assassination plots. John McCloy, chief negotiator during the Cuban missile crisis, was quite familiar with the government-wide effort to subvert Castro's regime. And two other commissioners, Richard Russell and Gerald Ford, sat in on closed-door, unminuted congressional hearings about CIA budgets, policies, and covert activities. Ford confirmed that in 1963-64 he was aware of agency efforts to subvert Castro, with the exception of proposed assassination plots. And Russell, who dominated congressional involvement in intelligence matters, was a stout believer in covert activities. Far from being an inquisitive, troublesome overseer, "Mr. Senate" acted as the CIA's protector and advocate on Capitol Hill. There is no indication that he viewed his role on the commission any differently. Not one of these four – out of seven – commissioners shared whatever special insight he had with the staff, nor is that really

surprising. These men were steeped in the Cold War and in what sometimes had to be done to wage it.

Consider, too, the actions of those officials outside the commission who had the standing and power to bring any relevant information to Warren's attention had they chosen to do so. In particular, consider the role of Attorney General Robert Kennedy. He played a unique part: Not only was he the brother of the slain President, but he had virtually unrivaled knowledge about anti-Castro activities. Indeed, more than any other official, the thirty-eight-year-old Kennedy embodied the harsh political, institutional, and personal dilemmas that existed in the assassination's wake. Any reconsideration of the Warren Commission must address RFK's role directly. His response is a Rosetta stone.

The standard explanation for RFK's seeming uninterest in the commission, as put forward in biographies and memoirs by friends, is that he simply found the subject too painful. Although kept fully apprised of the commission's progress, he emotionally recused himself from the investigation. As RFK told close associates, "Jack was dead" and nothing he could do would bring him back. In *The Death of a President* William Manchester writes that many of the Kennedy clan who were crushed by the assassination managed to right themselves after the funeral – but not RFK. During the spring of 1964 a "brooding Celtic agony ... darken[ed] Kennedy's life." He was nonfunctional for hours at a time and to those closest to him seemed almost in physical pain.

What genuinely sent RFK reeling may have been what the historian Robert Jay Lifton calls "survivor guilt," a feeling that he should have died instead of the president. In the end, the raw probability, after all conspiracies were ruled out, was that the administration's obsession with Castro had inadvertently motivated a politicized sociopath. Oswald had seen embodied in President Kennedy all American opposition to Castro, but it was Robert Kennedy, more than his brother, who had played the driving role in the anti-Castro subversion. RFK's involvement had begun just two days after the inauguration, when at the new president's behest the new attorney general had been included in the first of seven CIA briefings on the plan to invade Cuba. Attorneys general had never before participated in such deliberations, but that was only the beginning.

After the Bay of Pigs debacle, in April 1961, the president ordered RFK to help General Maxwell Taylor poke around the CIA and find out what had gone wrong. Operating with his usual zeal, Robert Kennedy immersed himself in agency affairs over the next two months, and the more he understood of the CIA's capabilities, the more ardent a champion he became. Precisely because the Bay of Pigs was such a catastrophe, the Kennedys grew more determined than ever to see Castro deposed.

While Castro erected a sign near the invasion site that read "WELCOME TO THE SITE OF THE FIRST DEFEAT OF IMPERIALISM IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE," the Kennedy administration resumed plotting against him in earnest. By November 1961 another covert plan, code-named MONGOOSE, was moving into high gear. This time the operation aimed to destabilize Castro's regime rather than overthrow it. In concert with overtly hostile diplomatic and economic policies, every possible covert tactic would be brought

to bear, including sabotage, psychological warfare, and proposed assassination plots; and the president installed his brother as czar over the entire, government-wide operation. As Pennsylvania Senator Harris Wofford (then a White House aide) wrote in his 1980 memoir, *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 next to an obsession for Robert Kennedy. RFK’s single-minded micro-management extended to almost daily telephone conversations with Richard Helms, deputy director of the CIA, during which calls the volatile attorney general applied “white heat” pressure. As Helms told *Newsweek* in 1993, “We had a whip on our back. If I take off my shirt, I’ll show you the scars.” It was abundantly clear that Castro was to be gotten rid of.

In 1962 the attorney general even decided the Mafia could be useful in Mongoose operations. He ordered the CIA to assign a case officer to meet with Mafia figures. “It was Bobby and his secretary (Angie Novello) who called the officer on what used to be called at the agency a secure line, [to] give him a name, an address, and where he would meet with the Mafia people,” recalls Samuel Halpern, a retired CIA official involved in MONGOOSE. The ensuing conversations contradicted almost every rule for clandestine operations the CIA had, and to add insult to injury, nothing useful ever developed from them. “We thought it was stupid, silly, ineffective, and wasteful,” says Halpern. “But we were under orders, and we did it.”

The CIA pursued MONGOOSE with determined vigor until the Cuban missile crisis put the United States and the Soviet Union at the brink of nuclear war. After that some advisers got Kennedy to take tentative steps toward trying to wean Castro from the Soviets, because the Cuban leader was smarting over the Russian “betrayal.” But the dominant U.S. policy remained intensely hostile. “Our interest lies in avoiding the kind of commitment that unduly ties our hands in dealing with the Castro regime while it lasts,” wrote Secretary of State Dean Rusk in a 1962 document only recently declassified. Ultimately, a more modest program of covert subversion was reintroduced by mid-1963. As before, it included the tactic of “neutralizing” Castro.

Despite the manifest relevance of these activities to the Warren inquiry, Robert Kennedy studiously avoided sharing any information about them with the commission – even when Earl Warren specifically asked him to. As David Belin, a counsel to the Warren Commission, recounts in *Final Disclosure*, Warren informed RFK of the commission’s progress, in a letter dated June 11, 1964, and asked him if he was aware of any “additional information relating to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy which has not been sent to the Commission.” Warren emphasized in particular the importance of any information suggesting a “domestic or foreign conspiracy.”

Kennedy wrote in response that “all information . . . in the possession of the Department of Justice” had been sent to the commission. He added 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.”

Several accounts make it clear that Robert Kennedy’s immediately instinct after the assassination was to look for a Cuban connection to Oswald, among either pro-Castro elements or Bay of Pigs veterans repatriated from Havana in December 1962. He asked McCone if agency-connected persons had killed JFK “in a way that [McCone] couldn’t lie to me, and [McCone replied] they hadn’t.” Through close associates, RFK also made other discreet inquiries about perceived administration enemies right after the assassination: What was Jimmy Hoffa’s reaction? Were Chicago mobsters involved?

Small wonder that in the black months after the murder Robert Kennedy became absorbed by the work of the Greek tragedians. He apparently found solace in one passage from Aeschylus, for he underlined it: “All arrogance will reap a harvest rich in tears. God calls men to a heavy reckoning for overweening pride.” Belin also tells of a 1975 conversation he had with McCone after news of the proposed assassination plots finally surfaced along with the fact that Robert Kennedy had overseen those plans. As Belin describes it, “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 was not disclosing . . . [It was McCone’s] personal belief that Robert Kennedy had personal feelings of guilt because he was directly or indirectly involved with the anti-Castro planning.”

In the case of RFK, of course, the national security that dictated silence was reinforced by a very personal imperative. As the reputation of the slain president soared, Robert Kennedy bore the burden of protecting that reputation and carrying its legacy. Already he had sought to insulate his brother from debacles (the Bay of Pigs) and turn near catastrophes into triumphs of calibrated, statesmanlike policy (the Cuban missile crisis). Full disclosure surely would have threatened the emerging Camelot view of the Kennedy presidency and, it must be said, RFK’s fortunes as well. His own political stock was skyrocketing after the assassination.

On the first occasion when he spoke directly about Oswald, Kennedy said exactly what the Warren Commission would eventually report. He told a student questioner in Poland in June 1964, “I believe it was done by a man . . . who was a misfit in society [He] felt that the only way to take out his strong feelings against life and society was by killing the president of the United States. There is no question that he did it on his own and by himself. He was not a member of the right-wing organization. He was a confessed Communist, but even the Communists would not have anything to do with him.”

Even if other officials did not know as much as RFK or share his need to keep the Kennedy image burnished, their personal and institution loyalties likewise determined the extent of their cooperation with the commission. Anyway, if, as the communications intercepts proved, there was no link between Oswald and the Soviet or Cuban

government, then Warren had no need to know about the past and ongoing covert operations directed against Cuba, regardless of how relevant they were to Oswald's internal equation. Not a few officials and Cold war operatives had an interest in leaving the assassin a crazed loner, acting on some solitary impulse.

To put it another way, officials in the know faced a genuine dilemma only if they had information pointing to someone other than Oswald. The Warren Commission could not deliver to the American people and the world a false conclusion – that might well affect the stability of the government or shake important institutions to their foundations – but there was every reason not to spill secrets that merely echoed the finding that Oswald acted alone. The commission, though denied important supporting information, would still publish the correct conclusion, and the U.S. government could keep its deepest secrets. It was a convenient act of denial and dismissal, but also one perceived as necessary in the midst of the Cold War. Complete candor would not have changed the report's two essential conclusions at all – though it might have done a great deal to prevent its slide into disrepute later.

Full disclosure might have helped the commission explain the political element in Oswald's motive by putting his pro-Castro activities in a new dimension, but the price was considered to be too high. The CIA, especially, had every reason to dread a no-holds-barred investigation into the events of November 22. An uncontrolled investigation would have had serious repercussions for ongoing covert operations. Beyond the inevitable exposure of MONGOOSE, possibly the largest covert operation that had ever been mounted, the revelations would have given the Communist bloc an undreamed-of propaganda windfall that would have lasted years. There would have followed strong condemnations by the international community and intense investigations of the CIA and administration officials who had directed anti-Castro efforts. Such investigations could conceivably have destroyed the CIA, and it was surely not LBJ's intention to blunt his Cold War weapons when he announced the commission's formation. Altogether, there simply was no contest between these risks and the potential damage that silence might inflict on the Warren Commission's reputation should the withheld information ever leak out.

In time the Warren Commission will be seen for what it truly was. It was not a fiendish cover-up, nor was it designed to anesthetize the country by delivering a political truth at odds with the facts. It was a monumental criminal investigation carried to its utmost limits and designed to burn away a fog of speculation. It did not achieve perfection, and in the rush to print (there was no rush to judgment) the language on pivotal issues, such as the single bullet, was poorly crafted. In retrospect, forensic and scientific experts should have been put on the lawyer-dominated panel. But the commission indisputably achieved its main goal: to determine what happened in Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963. That was the one thing that needed to be and could be proved beyond a reasonable doubt. And the accuracy of the report's essential finding, holding up after three decades, is testimony to the commission's basic integrity. Indeed, as a British reviewer once put it, the best tribute to the solidity of the report is the deviousness of its critics.

The commission did not conduct its work in a political vacuum, nor could it. In fact the Warren Commission reflects a view common during the Cold War, one Gerald Ford explained in general terms during his vice-presidential confirmation hearings in 1973, that government officials have the right, if not the duty, to tell the truth but not necessarily the whole truth when an issue involves national-security matters. Some Americans erroneously believe that secrets *per se* contradict official verdicts; just as often, if not more often, they buttress conclusions, as the case here shows.

Was parceling out truths an outrageous act or a necessary one during the forty-five years of the Cold War? It depends on one's perspective. There is no doubt it was done here. Secrets considered inessential to the inquiry were kept secret even from the commission. Those considered essential were shared with the commission but not the public. No doubt referring to the communications intercepts, Earl Warren told the press shortly before the report's publication that there were "things that will not be revealed in our lifetime." Or as former President Ford now acknowledges, "Judgments were made back then that seemed rational and reasonable. Today with the totally different atmosphere those judgments might seem improper." The Warren Commission's investigation cut across the entire national-security apparatus during the height of the Cold War, when even a national trauma could not be allowed to disturb the inner workings and unalterable logic of that struggle.

Was this instance of holding back some of the great misjudgments in American history? Enduring, perhaps ineradicable controversy over the assassination has helped foster deep alienation and cynicism and a loss of respect among the American people for their government and the citizens who serve in it. That is perhaps the most lasting and grievous wound inflicted by Lee Harvey Oswald.