

## Reality Check

*Thinking Critically about the Kennedy Assassination: Debunking the Myths and Conspiracy Theories*

Michel Jacques Gagné

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*By Martin J. Kelly Jr.*

In a world of sensible analysis there is an inverse relationship between analytic knowledge and unwarranted suspicion. The more we understand how the real world actually materializes in our daily lives, the less likely are we to imagine nefarious puppeteers behind the scenes. But now we are in a paranoia-laden culture that finds it easy to assert that the murder of twenty children was faked by the government, or that the Israeli Defense Force trains NYC police officers to deliver violence to innocent US citizens. These days political passion intensifies conspiracy claims and inoculates believers against embarrassment and refutation.

Fringe ideas have always been noisy in America. In the '30s, a rash of *outré* notions marched into the Depression spotlight to capture the imagination of the disaffected. Utopian criticism from the thrusts of Huey Long, Father Charles Coughlin and William Dudley Pelley, for example, created deep mistrust of traditional thinking and government. Some of the movements were basted in anti-Semitism and proto-Nazism at the same time as Adolf Hitler became living myth to German *volk*. America was able to shrug off these radical forces because in the throes of the Depression mainstream politics and media gave them very little breathing room. In the long run, their effect on the electorate was puny.

After the tumultuous '60s, America's courting of half-baked ideas was quickened by an emerging and powerful popular culture teeming with salient facts unleavened by deliberative analysis. In its "now for something completely new" insistence on breadth against depth, the ubiquity of electronic media is part of the genome of the surge in unexamined thinking. All ideas were (are) of equal force. As a generalization, the conspiracy theory (CT) "take" on the assassination of JFK in 1963 is a hard-core historical element in the unwitting pursuit of "at-large" mythic ideas in the country—the death of a president is mainstream by definition. That the murder was investigated by two different government initiatives in 1964 and 1977-78, solidifies its genetic importance for American suspicion along with several zany notions that come with it in the pop culture.

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[Michel Jacques Gagné's \*Thinking Critically\*](#) is a richly-detailed antidote to JFK conspiracy thought. He submits JFK CT thinking to direct tests against reality. It is impossible to praise this book too much or to capture its power in a few words. The result of decades of research and five years of writing, *Thinking Critically* is a textured and thoughtful treatment of many of the major conspiracy themes surrounding JFK's murder. While he asserts the analysis is not an exercise in formal logic, Gagné does pick out some hackneyed fallacies in the JFK CT literature like *sic hoc ergo propter hoc* and "lack of evidence indicates a successful cover-up." And he includes types of fallacies and formal argument in two very useful appendices.

The entire book is somewhat discursive, i.e., moves coherently from topic to topic without attempting to glue together the JFK CT movement into a univocal conceptual package. The soul of the book is in its conceptually savvy treatment of crucial features in the JFK CT tradition through a sound hearing of full evidence in each analysis. Just about all of the CT cognitive artifices that have distorted the murder for decades collapse under the weight of their own jerry-rigged density and the force of the evidence Gagné examines. The analysis demonstrates most CT facts to be "factoids" and conspiracy scenarios to be filled with fundamental contradictions. Not one conspiracy claim survives the established facts.

[\*Thinking Critically\*](#) intimates that the JFK Camelot myth had ignited energetically from Jacqueline Kennedy's PR fantasies about her dead husband into a full-fisted Arthurian political and moral depiction of JFK by CT writers. JFK became a peace-loving universal ultra-liberal whose loving kindness and superior moral stance made him the target of hateful intolerance from his own colleagues in government. In such a Romantic *milieu*, every citizen with an inclination toward reading conspiracy into his murder was possessed by unstoppable passion.

Gagné suggests that JFK's death was felt as an end to liberal hope so that a wellspring of desperation kept the conspiracy alive in a segment of the population. As time went on, then, the original Warren Commission and its defenders become historical villains in the vision of the CT community.

We learn that Oswald was not the mild-mannered cipher lionized in CT writings. Oswald's story is checkered and problematic. While there is a psychiatric history of him in 1953 when he was in the New York city public school system, Gagné's analysis relies mostly on more accessible facts rather than on technical psychological observations. Anyone can support these quotidian facts with the professional psychiatric examination on the record. Oswald was filled with fantasies of omnipotence and violence as part of his personality disorder.

Crucial physical evidence such as ballistics, forensics, X-rays and photos, and the Zapruder film are ratified again and again by straightforward exposition. All claims of these elements having been forged or altered by Dallas Police, FBI, military doctors, secret X-ray or film labs are shown not only to be groundless but also to be impossible in 1963. The backyard photos, the autopsy report with X-rays and photos, the Mannlicher-Carcano rifle and the single bullet, the fragments from JFK's skull and Governor Connally's body, etc., are indelibly certified by a cold look at the brute facts of the case.

All of the standard CT claims, baroque and mundane, are shredded in *Thinking Critically* by a sane study of basic facts and evidence. Grassy Knoll and man-hole snipers, as well as Oswald impersonators and KGB operations explode under rational scrutiny. Icons of the conspiracy movement evaporate as well under the epistemic ridicule brilliantly wielded by Professor Gagné. We learn not only that Nixon, LBJ, CIA, the mafia and the Pentagon, etc. had

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no hand in JFK's murder but also that major CT public figures were less than competent with the primary empirical findings in the case. Mark Lane, David Lifton, Gary Aguilar, David Mantik and even Roger Stone, to name a few, are stripped of their New Clothes.

Lifton believes JFK's body was switched and altered at autopsy. Gagné shows the clear impossibility of such a maneuver. Mantik, who has a PhD in physics and an MD, insists the x-rays were altered to make JFK's front skull entry wound look like an exit wound. While Gagné demonstrates how Mantik, a radiologist, has rotated an X-ray improperly to make his claim, he doesn't indict the doctor for other technically unsound CT research on JFK's skull X-ray that catapulted Mantik stage-front in the CT movement a few decades back. A bit bumbling and a little paranoid are some of these CT thinkers despite their PhD's and MD's. To see these notions and their proposers unmasked as Gagné punches up the validity of foundational facts is an epiphany for the reader.

*Thinking Critically* is a beautiful and indispensable contribution to public sanity in an age of tabloid concepts. It shows unequivocally that, in the decades since 1963, only an evidence-free paranoid suspicion has characterized the conspiracy community's long Sumo-grapple with the reality of the JFK case. Everyone should read the book and be deeply grateful.

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