

Odyssey of a Recovering Conspiracist

By Max Holland

I Was A Teenage JFK Conspiracy Freak

Fred Litwin

NorthernBlues Books. 271 pp. \$17.00.

One of the oddities about the Kennedy assassination research community is that very few people change their minds after having staked out their initial position. The aphorism, possibly apocryphal, that is attributed to the famous economist John Maynard Keynes—“When my information changes, I alter my conclusions. What do you do, sir?”—seldom applies.

But when it does happen, even short of going all the way, the consequences are often notable. Some of the most important contributors and writers in the field are former full-fledged conspiracy buffs, people who dramatically or incrementally changed their minds and were not embarrassed to admit as much. [Paul Hoch](#), [David Reitzes](#), [Gus Russo](#), [Dale Myers](#), and the late [Gary Mack](#) come to mind.

Now Fred Litwin, in his new book, [*I Was a Teenage JFK Conspiracy Freak*](#), traces his transformation from a young, energetic conspiracist to the vigorous debunker he is today. The result is a brisk, bracing, witty, and surprisingly comprehensive read, and one that ought to be considered by anyone in Generation Z who is intrigued by the assassination and thinking of joining the research community.

A caveat is required: Litwin favorably cites some of my work on the assassination in his text and source notes, so this review might not be regarded as disinterested. So be it.

The great divide among conspiracists, of course, has always been the 1967 to 1969 investigation by New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison, whose own account of the probe later became the basis for Oliver Stone’s 1991 film *JFK*. Litwin devotes the most pages to these closely bound-together milestones, and probably deservedly so. Garrison’s prosecution of Clay Shaw was the only time someone was tried for conspiring

to assassinate President Kennedy. And whatever one might think of Stone's movie, it has to rank as one of the most influential pieces of work to ever come out of Hollywood. Few, if any, films can lay claim to having instigated new law, although to be sure, the corresponding end of the cold war in the early 1990s was a necessary precondition. Nonetheless [The President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992](#) only came about because of the controversy the film generated.

Litwin is merciless in his criticism of first Garrison, and then Stone—a stance which has garnered the author the attention of Garrison/Stone's leading [sycophants and apologists](#). Little of the substance of Litwin's criticism is new, but his angle of attack is somewhat novel. He correctly stresses the homophobia underlying Garrison's baseless and fanciful indictment of Clay Shaw, a prominent New Orleans businessman who happened to be a closeted homosexual. (Before finally fingering the CIA/military-industrial complex as the guilty party, Garrison proclaimed the assassination was a "homosexual thrill-killing"). American mores have shifted dramatically since the late 1960s, and it is almost impossible to imagine a contemporary prosecutor getting away with the persecution of a vulnerable, if prominent, member of society because of his or sexual preferences. Shaw's homosexuality was reported at the time, but in retrospect, the role it played in his two-year ordeal was underappreciated. Of the two men, Garrison and Stone, it is difficult to decide which is more despicable. Garrison abused his office, while Stone cynically turned a demented demagogue into a hero styled after Gary Cooper, while depicting Shaw as some inchoate combination of an assassination ringleader/snooty sexual deviant/CIA operative.

The chapter in Litwin's book that came as the biggest eye-opener concerns the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), which, like the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) in this country, aired documentaries on the assassination periodically. It is a well-known fact that the late [Don Hewitt](#), a famed CBS producer who also founded that network's *60 Minutes* program, was an avid believer in a conspiracy. Nonetheless, Hewitt participated in several CBS documentaries about the assassination that rank among the best shows ever produced on the subject. The same cannot be said for the CBC and its version of Hewitt, Brian McKenna. Litwin, who is Canadian, traces how *The Fifth Estate*, CBC's premier investigative documentary series, has repeatedly propagated what another CBC producer called, in an unguarded moment, "responsible sensationalism." It is sobering to read that the nonsense about the assassination that is so routinely spouted domestically also finds credulous producers and audiences elsewhere.

If I have one criticism of Litwin's book, it is that his own trajectory is only lightly described. He refers to his initial fascination, which occurred in March 1975, when Geraldo Rivera broadcast a bootleg copy of the Zapruder film for the first time ever on television. "Kennedy's backwards head snap (as depicted in the film, after the third shot), intrigued me," Litwin writes. "I had to find out more." But aside from a critical article Litwin wrote for the student newspaper about a "sensationalist" assassination investigator named Rusty Rhodes late in 1975, and a reference to a later article by Litwin, which led a fellow conspiracist to accuse Litwin of being a CIA agent, we get few clues about the author's metamorphosis into a staunch defender of the official verdict.

I would have liked a much finer description about how Litwin came to question his belief in a conspiracy: when he started to have doubts, why, how they grew, and what explained his credulousness in the first place.