

Much Ado About Nothing

Almost a third of Americans believe there was a wider conspiracy to kill Jack Kennedy. They're wrong.

BY MAX HOLLAND

On October 26, the National Archives was supposed to release the last of its remaining records on the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The date was chiseled in a 1992 statute. Around 88 percent of the records had already been made public, but there were still 3,200 documents that had never been available and nearly 35,000 more that had only been released in redacted form.

As the date neared, Representative Walter B. Jones (R-N.C.) declared, "It's time to let people know the truth." Jones believes (like a majority of Americans, according to polls) that accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald had confederates and that important facts about that "awful afternoon" are still hidden away. Martha Wagner Murphy, chief of the special access and Freedom of Information Act staff at the National Archives, repeatedly cautioned that the documents would add only incremental information to what was already evident. But few in the general public and fewer still in the "research community," as Kennedy-assassination conspiracy theorists prefer to be known, were willing to believe her. After five decades, occasions for challenging the official verdict are few and far between. The community knew the disclosures could gin up interest, and the excitement reached all the way to the White House.

Donald Trump created much of the drama by tweeting his inclination to align with those calling for full disclosure: No more postponements, no more deletions, damn the Deep State, he seemed to be saying on October 21. At the eleventh hour he deferred to the U.S. intelligence agencies and gave them an extra six months to make their cases for continuing to redact or withhold a tiny portion of the record. But documents were to be released as fast as they could be processed.

Murphy has been proven right; the pages released in five document dumps so far this year (there was a release on July 24 that attracted no fanfare) haven't told us anything

of moment we didn't already know. The pseudo-drama surrounding the October date has only served to illustrate what H.L. Mencken once called "the virulence of the national appetite for bogus revelation."

Press reports propagated the misperception that these "classified Kennedy assassination files" had never seen the light of day. That was a half-truth. The records had been pried out of federal agencies more than two decades ago and closely parsed by the Assassination Records Review Board (ARRB), an entity created by the John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992. The statute was Congress's response to widespread public dismay over a closing line in Oliver Stone's 1991 film, *JFK*, which noted that many federal documents pertaining to the assassination were sealed until 2029. The legislative remedy provided that all the records from the federal government's investigations be gathered in one place and opened up once and for all. It's important to stress the plural—*investigations*. Everyone knows about the Warren Commission's 1964 report, but it was preceded by the FBI's December 1963 report and followed by probes undertaken by the 1968 Clark Panel, named after then-attorney general Ramsey Clark; the 1975 Rockefeller Commission; the 1975-76 Senate Church Committee; and the 1978-79 House Select Committee on Assassinations. And those are only the *major* investigations.

The language in the 1992 act stated that all records concerning the assassination would "carry a presumption of immediate disclosure" unless the originating agency could make a compelling argument for continued secrecy. This simple-sounding directive turned out to be more complicated in practice.

The National Archives started fulfilling its responsibilities right away. It already housed the Warren Commission documents, and it soon developed a computerized finding aid to facilitate research. Executive branch agencies began to identify, review, and transfer to the archives all pertinent records in their custody. The CIA was the first to comply, transferring 50 boxes of documents—most generated after November 22, 1963—on Lee Harvey Oswald, constituting his so-called "personality" or "201" file. The FBI, which had

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been the lead agency in investigating the assassination, soon followed suit with the case files of what had been an unprecedented probe in terms of manpower, scale, and scope.

But it wasn't until early 1994 that the ARRB got going. The law asked the president to pick at least four of the five board members from names forwarded by the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, the Society of American Archivists, and the American Bar Association. The eventual nominees were U.S. district court judge John R. Tunheim; Henry F. Graff, professor emeritus of history at Columbia University; Kermit L. Hall, professor of history and law at Ohio State; William L. Joyce, associate university librarian for special collections at Princeton; and Anna K. Nelson, a distinguished historian at American University. (It then took another six months for them to get confirmed and to hire a staff of around 30 for the duration of the project.)

The ARRB's first task was to determine what constitutes an assassination record. The statute was deliberately vague on this point. Records from the federal investigations were a given (release of the Warren Commission's records had begun in 1965, and they were 98 percent available by 1992), along with the records generated internally by the Secret Service, FBI, and CIA, working in conjunction with (and sometimes in opposition to) these probes. Records from several presidential libraries were also obviously included. But how far afield should the ARRB go beyond that? Were Lyndon Johnson's tape-recorded telephone conversations, ostensibly closed until at least 2023, assassination records? What about the copious notes taken by William Manchester during interviews for his Kennedy-family-sanctioned book *The Death of a President* (1967)? These were under lock and key at the Kennedy Library. Or how about the district attorney's investigative files from the only criminal trial of an alleged conspirator, that of Clay Shaw in New Orleans in 1969? For that matter, were the KGB files on Lee Harvey Oswald's Soviet sojourn assassination records?

These were among the most pertinent records the ARRB could possibly gather, yet the board succeeded only half the time, even armed with subpoena power. The far-seeing director of the Johnson Library, Harry Middleton, persuaded Lady Bird Johnson to revoke her husband's will and release, first, the assassination-related tapes and eventually all the Johnson tapes. After some contentious wrangling with the Orleans Parish district attorney, the ARRB secured former D.A. Jim Garrison's investigative files and the transcripts from the grand jury that had handed down the Shaw indictment. But Manchester steadfastly refused to waive his deed of gift and Caroline Kennedy

would not even let the ARRB's staff review records from the Manchester interviews she controlled, those of Robert F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy. The Manchester documents remain sealed for 100 years. Finally, lacking support from the White House and State Department, the ARRB fared no better in retrieving copies of the files from the KGB's aggressive and comprehensive surveillance of Oswald between 1959 and 1962.



From film shot by Abraham Zapruder, November 22, 1963: Above, the presidential motorcade enters Dallas's Dealey Plaza; below, Kennedy reacts to being hit by the first bullet.



What genuinely changed the terms of engagement, however, was the ARRB's final definition of an assassination record, promulgated in the *Federal Register* in June 1995. The designation was all-encompassing, a direct result of the ARRB's having embraced the very broadest definition of "assassination-related" owing to pressure from the research community. This decision raised by an exponential number the volume of records various federal departments, agencies, and bureaus would be digging out. The JFK Assassination Records Collection at the National Archives thus became a vast repository of documents on

topics ranging from CIA operations in Mexico City during the Cold War to the functioning of congressional investigative committees. Dozens of dissertations are waiting to be written based on the records there.

Yet if one looks at the collection through a different lens—in terms of documents germane to an actual political murder—any criminal court would deem 99 percent of the collection inadmissible by virtue of being irrelevant or immaterial. The CIA-supported Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 is at best tangential to the Kennedy assassination, but the ARRB included thousands of pages about not only that episode, but also about every CIA attempt to destabilize Castro in the early '60s. *Assassination-related* and *directly pertinent to the assassination* are quite different things. The great bulk of the records vetted by the ARRB are best described as snapshots of how Washington was waging the Cold War before and after 12:30 P.M. on November 22, 1963.

During the ARRB's four years of operation (1994-98), it gathered records from all the obvious federal agencies and many that don't immediately come to mind when thinking about the killing of John Kennedy (the Department of Labor, for instance, or the Social Security Administration). Having identified and amassed these records, the ARRB then devoted its efforts to full disclosure. The most vexing issues arose, predictably, with respect to records from the intelligence agencies and the Secret Service.

The hush-hush National Security Agency—its initials were once said to stand for “No Such Agency”—turned out to be relatively relaxed about releasing the communications it had intercepted before and after the assassination, according to David Marwell, executive director of the ARRB for three of its four years of existence. The NSA had gone into overdrive after the Dallas shooting, rushing to decipher intercepts of telephone conversations, cable traffic, and radio communications from the highest levels of the Soviet and Cuban governments. Tasks that normally took months were completed in days. Particularly focused on Cuba, the NSA gathered a fair amount of primary information that showed the Cuban regime was not involved with the assassination, was caught quite by surprise, and was, more than anything, worried about being blamed because of Oswald's express support for Castro's 1959 revolution.

The number of NSA documents at issue was small—in the low hundreds—and what the agency wanted to conceal were the headers and footers, which indicated transmission

times, geographic locations, and even how the intercept was routed internally. These are clues to how the NSA goes about its business, and the ARRB generally went along with NSA requests to elide such information. But the substantive contents of NSA documents were rarely at issue.

The Secret Service was probably the most difficult agency, in that it actually tried to classify documents in an effort to keep some information secret. The service wanted to withhold the names of individuals listed on its “threat sheets” from 1963, which is how it used to keep track of persons believed to pose a danger to the president. Many, if not most, of these people had mental-health issues. The service went so far as to appeal to the White House to reverse the ARRB's decision to make the names and associated files available—which the 1992 statute permitted agencies to do if they disagreed with the vote taken by the five board members to release a document in full or even in redacted form. The service's argument was that releasing names so long after Kennedy's death served no public interest and could interfere with the quiet cooperation it still depends on from the mental-health community.

The CIA consented to the release of 3,172 documents, but had objections of one kind or another with respect to 14,079 more. These had to be vetted by the board and amounted to nearly half of the 29,000 documents that came up for a vote. The agency's approach was to send in wave after wave of officials to lobby the ARRB and explain why this or that redaction was necessary. Langley's objections centered on three areas: its relationships with other intelligence agencies and the information that had been gleaned through such liaisons; details about its presence in foreign countries or its domestic facilities; and the names of CIA officers and informants. In the end, the ARRB generally released the names of CIA employees, while details about domestic assets or informants were disclosed on a case-by-case basis. Meanwhile, the identities of foreign nationals who served as informants or assets were generally protected, although their codenames or “crypts” were not (and these, in turn, allowed the true identities of many confidential sources to be ferreted out by diligent researchers). Surveillance methods were disclosed if directly relevant to Oswald's peregrinations, but documents that disclosed the existence of active domestic CIA facilities were redacted. The records

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over which the CIA lobbied most vigorously—reflecting its work with foreign intelligence agencies—were almost entirely deferred by the board.

Board member William Joyce recalls that it took several months for the ARRB to hone its process for reviewing the documents and develop its own “common law” about what to disclose and what to protect. As time passed, not only did the board become more confident about what it was doing, but so did the agencies. “From their initial posture of ‘trust us,’” Joyce says, “they, too, evolved quite a bit in their attitude and cooperation with us.” Not all documents at issue were redacted or postponed until October 2017 either; in many cases earlier release deadlines were mutually agreed upon.

The FBI had an equal amount at stake—the possible exposure of the entire counterintelligence toolkit it deployed during the Cold War. A great obstacle to overcome was the use of confidential informants, the FBI’s lifblood. After the assassination, the bureau had pulled out all the stops and milked anyone in its vast network who had the slightest chance of knowing anything. This included not only CIs in Dallas, but mob snitches in Chicago, where Jack Ruby hailed from; a member of the Soviet delegation to the U.N.; persons affiliated with the New York-based Fair Play for Cuba Committee (a cause Oswald championed); high-ranking members of the American Communist party; and countless others here and abroad. The FBI had fallen out of contact with most of these informants over the decades. It didn’t know where they lived, or even if they were still alive, and certainly didn’t want to expend the manpower to find out if belated exposure of their informant status might put them in danger.

Ultimately, as with the CIA, the bureau reached an accommodation with the ARRB that balanced the former’s interest with the latter’s statutory obligation. The FBI consented to ARRB processing of 21,509 documents, while 10,013 were subjected to a vote by the board. In general, the ARRB postponed naming human sources who were foreign nationals. Foreign government information was withheld unless it was deemed directly relevant. The FBI appealed to the White House because it disagreed with a few of the board’s decisions, chiefly regarding counterintelligence surveillance against foreign countries. Ultimately, information about such activities against Communist countries was generally released, while records concerning surveillance of non-Communist countries were postponed.

By the time the ARRB closed down in September 1998, its JFK assassination collection consisted of more than 319,000 discrete records totaling approximately five-million pages: Only 1 percent of the documents were

withheld in full. Although this category sounds alluring, the 3,200 withheld records include many designated “not believed relevant” to the assassination, having been simply swept up in the ARRB’s expansive definition. Over the next 19 years, as the National Archives took over from the ARRB, the JFK collection remained generally stable, adding only bits and pieces here and there.

All of these facts are readily learned from the ARRB’s final report—published in 1998 and available online—and



Above, Kennedy slumps toward his wife; below, the second bullet strikes.



in a September article in *Prologue*, the quarterly journal published by the National Archives. But little to none of the background and context made it into the overheated press coverage that preceded the October 26 release. And the single most important point was almost entirely overlooked. As Marwell repeatedly stressed to me during a recent interview, if at any time during its four years of operation, the board had run across information directly pertinent to the assassination—including any fact that challenged the official verdict—its release would have been approved instantly.

The ARRB was in the business of building an archive not fact-finding, and its final report does not explicitly endorse the Warren Commission's conclusions. But no document the board saw disproved that Oswald fired all three shots in Dealey Plaza or any of the other pillars of the Warren Report: that no more than two bullets struck Kennedy; that no bullet entered his body from a direction other than from behind; that there was no evidence of Oswald's involvement with a domestic or foreign conspiracy; that Oswald had never worked in any capacity for the FBI or CIA; and, finally, that neither agency had any pre-November 22 information that should have landed Oswald on the Secret Service's threat sheet. There was no "smoking gun" that genuinely contradicted the Warren Report, and had the AARB discovered one, its release would never have been postponed until 2017.

The whole premise of the October 26 coverage was preposterous, evincing a complete lack of understanding of how the ARRB functioned, how broadly "assassination-related" had been defined, and why a tiny fraction of the documents still remained at issue.

There was a logical inconsistency, too. If the federal government was capable of a crime as heinous as many conspiracy theorists claim, why would it ever release documents showing that it had lied starting with release of the Warren Report? Why not just destroy the incriminating records or, better yet, forge exculpatory documents? There had been plenty of time to go over the paper trail with care. The argument that the withheld records would finally expose a government cover-up revealed either a quaint belief that Washington would grudgingly admit to a new truth or naïveté bordering on stupidity.

‘**W**e live in a state of opinion trusteeship,’ Victor Navasky observed in 2010. “None of us have the time and few of us the ability to do our own research” on historically problematic cases such as the Sacco-Vanzetti affair, the Rosenberg espionage case, J. Robert Oppenheimer's security clearance, or the Kennedy assassination. As citizens, we depend on historians and investigative journalists to be our proxies and make sense of these complex events. Specialized knowledge is hard-won, and expertise on one subject rarely transferable to another. For the media, however, too often *any* historian will do as commentator on a controversy so long as he cooperates in ratcheting up the rhetoric and suggesting a story where none really exists.

When NPR's *Morning Edition* asked Robert Dallek, a biographer of both Kennedy and Johnson, to speculate on October 25 about the contents of the records to be released the next day, he suggested they “might demonstrate that the FBI and the CIA were somehow incompetent or had fallen short in their assessment of what someone like Oswald was doing and that maybe they fear embarrassment from the revelation of these documents. I think that would be closer to the truth of what we're going to see than any additional information about some conspiracy.”

Yet documents revealing incompetence or neglect were *precisely* the kind of records the ARRB would have released and never held back.

What Dallek hinted at was scarcely different from the conspiracy theorist and Trump confidant Roger Stone's suggestion that the records “must reflect badly on the CIA.” Again, the bulk of the redactions requested by the agency concerned intelligence-gathering mechanisms in Mexico City, a beehive of intelligence operations during the Cold War, and had nothing to do with foreknowledge of Oswald's intentions or capacities. Dallek's innuendo also ignored the fact that the State Department and CIA had impressed upon the ARRB that U.S. intelligence-

sharing arrangements with the Mexican government—as well as activities undertaken *without* local authorities' knowledge or permission—still had the potential to destabilize the ruling PRI, which had been in power in Mexico for more than 60 uninterrupted years.

For an anodyne observation, there was Michael Beschloss in a *New York Times* article published the morning of the release. He was quoted saying, “We just have to realize that there is never going to be an explanation of the Kennedy assassination that will satisfy everyone. That will never happen. At the same time, there are still mysteries on which these files might shed some light.”

Insofar as conspiracy theorists will never accept that Oswald acted alone, Beschloss, the author of numerous books about the postwar presidency, was correct. But he was neglecting his responsibility as a historian when he suggested that there are “still mysteries.” The *Times* article noted, “most people have never accepted the official version of events. A poll by Gallup in 2013, at the time of the 50th anniversary, found that 61 percent of Americans still believed that others besides Oswald were involved.”

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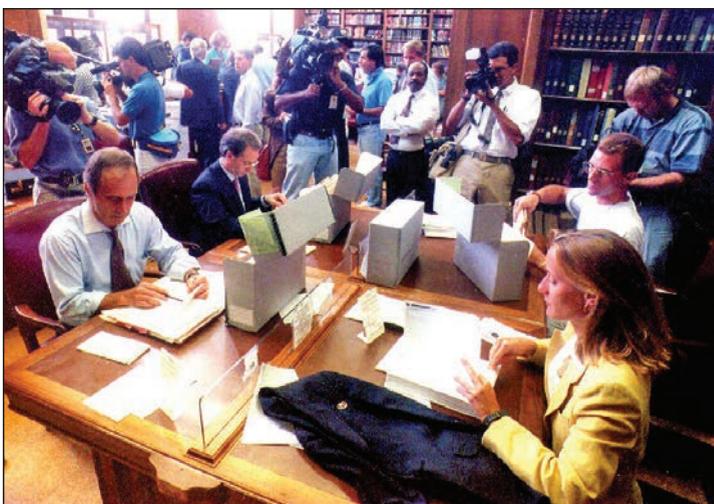
When leading historians pretend there are unexplained mysteries where there are none, it contributes to the public's confusion.

Journalists compounded the problem with articles that demonstrated a lamentable ignorance of the basics of the event. Fifty-four years after the Kennedy assassination and the *Washington Post* doesn't know if Oswald fired two or three shots. The newspaper also asserted on October 27—erroneously—that conspiracy theories have dogged the Warren Report because alleged “marching orders” given to the commission by Johnson effectively short-circuited the investigation. The *Wall Street Journal* alluded to the “CIA's failed pursuit of assassin Lee Harvey Oswald” in Mexico City just weeks before the assassination. Oswald was never a CIA target; to the degree he was captured on surveillance it was incidental, via the agency's routine monitoring of the Cuban and Soviet embassies there. The *New York Times*, for its part, described the Warren Report as “contested” and carried on as if that were synonymous with “false.” The paper of record resurrected two of the hoariest fictions of them all: the notion that Oswald did not have sufficient time to fire all three shots and that there was something “magic” about a fully jacketed bullet wounding both Kennedy and Texas governor John Connally. The *Times* seems to want readers to believe that there might have been a shot from the grassy knoll after all. These faults stemmed from the familiar news practice of false equivalence—the equal presentation of positions of unequal merit in order to project balance. Here it lent undeserved credence to conspiracists.

Similarly problematic is the media's hunt for instantaneous commentary and analysis. The National Archives JFK collection is vast and its provenance unusually complicated. Anyone who tried to satiate the press's demand for speedy answers did so at some peril.

Nothing illustrates this point better than the storm over a document that the National Archives accidentally designated as having been previously withheld in full. The press generally described this document as an FBI memorandum of conversation dated just two hours after Oswald had been killed by the self-appointed vigilante Jack Ruby on November 24, 1963. In the three-page “memcon,” FBI director J. Edgar Hoover is quoted as saying, “The thing I am concerned about . . . is having something issued so we can convince the public that Oswald is the real assassin.” No single document released on October 26 received more attention, and several media outlets even suggested this memcon was proof the government was only interested in pinning responsibility on Oswald rather than fully investigating the assassination.

There is no question that the memcon is significant. It represents the first communication from the FBI director to the president following Oswald's murder on national television and reveals Hoover's opposition to the notion of an independent commission that would sit in judgment of the FBI's investigation—something that was already being discussed within and without the government. Hoover's choice of words, which could be twisted into advocacy for a directed verdict, mean something quite different once one takes into account something mentioned elsewhere in the document: that the FBI laboratory had already matched the bullets that struck Kennedy with Oswald's rifle to the exclusion of all others. The memcon, moreover, isn't an



Researchers and reporters review newly released Kennedy-assassination documents at the National Archives, August 23, 1993.

FBI document but one generated in the White House. It was written by Walter Jenkins, one of LBJ's top aides, as he talked to Hoover (Johnson being unavailable). Jenkins was renowned for his ability at shorthand, which accounts for the complete sentences and the memcon's thoroughness.

I quoted from this document in my 2004 book, *The Kennedy Assassination Tapes*. The Jenkins memcon had been released in redacted form as far back as 1978, when the House Assassinations Committee was conducting its probe. The once-sensitive portions (fully restored by the ARRB and released in July 1998) referred to the interception of a phone call from Oswald to the Cuban embassy in Mexico City; to a letter Oswald sent to the Soviet embassy in Washington, which the FBI had intercepted, read, and resealed; and to the issue of whether Oswald wittingly or unwittingly also sent a letter to a KGB officer in charge of covert activities.

If news is defined as what we don't know, the memcon was not news in 2017. But none of the talking heads

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might stop the Chief of Police and his staff from doing so damned much talking on television. They did not really have a case against Oswald until we gave them our information. We traced the weapon, we identified the handwriting, we identified the fingerprints on the brown bag. U

We were able to identify the bullets as coming from that gun. All the Dallas Police had was three witnesses who tentatively identified him as the man who shot the policeman and boarded a bus to go home shortly after the President was killed. He got on a bus to go home to get a shirt and the bus conductor tentatively identified him as the man who boarded the bus. U

Oswald had been saying he wanted John Abt as his lawyer and Abt, with only that kind of evidence, could have turned the case around, I'm afraid. All the talking down there might have required a change of venue on the basis that Oswald could not have gotten a fair trial in Dallas. If they keep on talking, perhaps the same will be true of Baby. U

Chief of Police Curry I understand cannot control Capt. Fritz of the Homicide Squad, who is giving much information to the press. Since we now think it involves the Criminal Code on a conspiracy charge under Section 241, we want them to shut up. Furthermore, I have ordered the evidence be secured by the Police Department. We sent most of the evidence back to them. We still have the bullets that were fired and will keep them. U

The thing I am concerned about, and so is Mr. Katzenbach, is having something issued so we can convince the public that Oswald is the real assassin. Mr. Katzenbach thinks that the President might appoint a Presidential Commission of three outstanding citizens to make a determination. I countered with a suggestion that we make an investigative report to the Attorney General with pictures, laboratory work, etc. Then the Attorney General can make the report to the President and the President can decide whether to make it public. I felt this was better because there are several aspects which would complicate our foreign relations. For instance, Oswald made a phone call to the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City which we intercepted. It was only about a visa, however. He also wrote a S
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A page of the Jenkins memcon'

consulted during that frantic news cycle knew this. And the next day, the *New York Times* featured "Hoover's memo" as part of the new "treasure trove" open to investigators, and the *Washington Post* highlighted it in an October 28 article.

Even genuine expertise didn't necessarily afford protection against wince-inducing mistakes. Few experts will forgo an opportunity to be quoted in the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* even when discretion might be in order—I myself ventured to say the hype over the document release was overblown in the same *Times* article that quoted Beschloss. When the *Washington Post* contacted Peter Kornbluh, an analyst at the nonprofit National Security Archive and coauthor of a 2014 book on secret U.S. diplomacy with Castro's regime, he agreed

to supply reactions to the documents for the October 28 *Post* story. He singled out the "never-before-seen" Hoover memcon as an example of over-classification. "What is the secrecy around that document really about?" he asked, referring to a document released in full 19 years ago. But Kornbluh also pointed the *Post* reporter to a 31-page memo written by White House counsel Philip Buchen in 1975, which described assassination plotting in general and listed financial rewards that had been contemplated for anyone eliminating Castro and friends.

"The price list appears to be new," Kornbluh told the *Post*—except that nothing about "Operation BOUNTY," as it was dubbed in 1962, is unknown. The plan was first disclosed in the 1975 Church Committee report and described in detail in documents the ARRB released in 1994. A January 1962 memo about Operation BOUNTY, complete with the price list, was published in a 1999 book about the CIA's psychological warfare against Cuba. Nonetheless, Kornbluh told the *Washington Post* that because it included a price list, Buchen's memo "is one of the most comprehensive summaries of real and proposed assassination operations against Castro that I have ever read, and I have read all of them."

The 1975 Church report, with more than 120 printed pages devoted to plots against Castro, is far more detailed than Buchen's memo.

Of all the elements that went into the spectacle, perhaps the most predictable was the role played by proxy authors with a vested interest in stirring the pot, aided and abetted by a press that treats them with far more respect than they deserve thanks to their ability to generate column inches. This is an old problem that has dogged the official verdict on the Kennedy assassination since the mid-1960s; it might be labeled Lane-Epstein syndrome after the first authors to so benefit, Mark Lane and Edward Jay Epstein.

Lane was a struggling 36-year-old lawyer in November 1963 when he appointed himself the Emile Zola of a modern-day Dreyfus case: the “railroading” of a Dallas Marxist for the killing of the president. After just a few days of investigation, Lane penned his “J’accuse!,” which eventually found a home in the *National Guardian*, a leftist weekly run secretly by U.S. Communist party members. The *Guardian* claimed to be independent of Communist orthodoxy and was revered by fellow travelers.

That one issue of the *Guardian* turned out to be a sensation, and Lane never looked back. His 1966 book, *Rush to Judgment*, was a runaway bestseller, and the following year he threw in his lot with New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison, a silver-tongued demagogue. Perhaps the most-telling indicator of Lane’s audacious mendacity in denigrating the Warren Report was that the KGB chose to funnel money to Lane’s “Citizens’ Committee of Inquiry.” The goals of the KGB and Lane dovetailed nicely.

In contrast to Lane, Edward Jay Epstein was the model of the nonideological critic of the Warren Commission. As a 30-year-old graduate student in political science at Cornell University, he decided to write his master’s thesis on the functioning of the commission. Staff members and five of the seven commissioners cooperated. My first exposure to Epstein’s methodology occurred when I asked one of those staffers, Alfred Goldberg, about something that was sourced to him in Epstein’s 1966 book, *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth*—another bestseller. He told me that Epstein had taken no notes during their interview, and he didn’t seem to have a tape recorder up his sleeve. Goldberg was thus surprised to find that he was cited or quoted 15 times in the book; on 13 of those occasions, Goldberg said with some vehemence, he did not know the information attributed to him.

Epstein’s argument was that the commission had fashioned a verdict regardless of the facts, with the overriding purpose of pacifying the American people. This thesis appealed enormously to the American intelligentsia, which could not bring itself to believe that a left-winger had assassinated a liberal president.

But Epstein had it backwards. There was, of course, a political tinge to the Warren Report—a federal commission could hardly be without one. But in this instance it was entirely benign, though perhaps ill-advised, and was only applied retroactively, after the evaluation of all the facts. Primarily owing to its chairman, Chief Justice of the United States Earl Warren, the commission sought to take the political out of what was a political murder. Warren feared that if the public perceived Oswald as a Communist under Russian or Cuban control, rather than just a self-styled one, there would be another round of hysteria akin to the worst of the McCarthy era.

Contemporary equivalents to Lane and Epstein exist, exemplified by Jefferson Morley and Philip Shenon, both of whom are prolific, all too available, and trade on their establishment credentials to a credulous press.

Morley, a former reporter and editor at the *New Republic* and the *Washington Post*, has adopted Lane’s practice of repeating a falsehood until it acquires the veneer of truth. Morley operates a website, JFKfacts.org, and is the conspiracy theorist par excellence. His *idée fixe* is that Oswald was not only the target of aggressive CIA surveillance before the assassination, but was used for covert purposes that implicate the agency in the assassination—if not as an accomplice before the fact then as “legally culpable” for the “wrongful death of JFK.” It is also no small tribute to Morley that just as Lane (together with Jim Garrison) was able to posit a vast conspiracy involving a shadow government in cahoots with the military-industrial complex, Morley has succeeded in injecting his “Deep State culpability” theory into the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *Politico*, and the *Daily Beast*, either by writing for them directly or being relied upon as an expert. Russia, under Putin, continues to recycle the KGB canard that “American special services” participated in a political conspiracy directed against Kennedy. Morley makes for a useful ally.

Philip Shenon, by contrast, presents himself as having no ideological axe to grind. A former *New York Times* reporter, he has donned Epstein’s mantle as the reasonable and respectable critic of the official verdict on the Kennedy assassination. And, like Epstein before him, he was able to win the cooperation of several Warren Commission staffers for a book, *A Cruel and Shocking Act* (2013). At last, they must have thought, an experienced reporter who would tell their story accurately. They were wrong. When the late Richard Mosk, one of the staffers who cooperated, upbraided the former *Times*-man for his irresponsible claims, Shenon’s response was, “I gotta make a living.”

Shenon focuses on Oswald’s six-day visit to Mexico City seven weeks before the assassination. “All roads lead to Mexico City,” he averred recently. Shenon asserts that the notoriously prudish and socially awkward Oswald abruptly turned into a social butterfly on the leftist party circuit, attending a twist party in the company of Sylvia Duran, a Mexican national who worked at the Cuban embassy. Oswald had met her while trying to obtain a visa, and on the basis of no solid evidence whatsoever, Shenon says they had an affair. Cuban intelligence officers Oswald met at the party, Shenon goes on, subsequently recruited—or, at a minimum, inspired—Oswald to kill Kennedy. This theory appeals to everyone still hoping to find a larger meaning in the assassination: Castro via Oswald killed Kennedy because Kennedy was trying to kill Castro. Shenon is free

to engage in such flights of fancy largely because Havana has never opened its archives on Oswald, leaving a void. But we have learned enough to know that the only secret power center Oswald ever worked for was the one “in the privacy of his own mind,” as Norman Mailer, an early conspiracist, reluctantly concluded.

Shenon was ubiquitous during this autumn’s release spectacle and coauthored one prominent preview article for *Politico*. His partner for the piece was the political pundit and University of Virginia professor Larry J. Sabato. The author of *The Kennedy Half-Century* (2013), Sabato told the *Dallas Morning News* before the October 26 release, “My guess is if there ever were telltale documents, they were destroyed long ago.” If the documents are opened and don’t prove a conspiracy, the records must have been destroyed!

The gap between Sabato’s knowledge of the Kennedy assassination and his willingness to discuss it in public is perhaps the widest of anyone who is accepted by the media as an expert. He couldn’t wait to use his Twitter account to highlight his discoveries of “obscure clues and shiny objects” in the National Archives releases, which he likened to “an unassembled million-piece puzzle.” One of his first observations, as reported in the *Times* on October 27, was, “What I’ve learned so far is you can’t understand the Kennedy assassination or the Kennedy presidency or Oswald unless you understand the ’50s and early ’60s.”

Sabato noted one document he deemed particularly exciting. Sent to the NSA after the assassination, the Air Force message referred to an alleged plot to kill Kennedy and one of his sisters and recommended that NSA intercepts “be researched to determine a possible connection between cited CRITIC and the slaying of President Kennedy.” The *Washington Post*, which was hanging on every Sabato tweet, reported that the professor “believes the potential assassin was code-named CRITIC.” What Sabato didn’t know is that beginning in 1958, “CRITIC” was a term used to designate intelligence *messages* of high precedence that required urgent handling in Washington, ideally within 10 minutes of receipt.

Shenon and Sabato’s article in *Politico* warned the records release was likely to “help fuel a new generation of conspiracy theorists.” Thank you, but no. The current crop will do nicely.

David Marwell, the former executive director of the ARRB, says he found press coverage of the records release “quite depressing.” The combination of media hype and phony revelations made it seem as if the board’s work had been in vain. Years of good-faith effort and millions of dollars had been expended to create the collection; the goal was not just preservation and transparency, but closure.

I have been writing about the Kennedy assassination for almost 25 years, in publications ranging from the *New York Times* to obscure peer-reviewed technical periodicals (the *Journal of the Association for Crime Scene Reconstruction*). My first major article argued that the assassination and subsequent investigations could not be understood without placing them in the context of the Cold War—a novel argument in 1993. I have written about the pernicious effects of Moscow’s *dezinformatsiya* on American perceptions of the assassination, including the successful placement of a Soviet-era lie in Oliver Stone’s Hollywood blockbuster. Most recently, I harshly criticized the Warren Commission and the House Select Committee for their fundamental misreading of the Zapruder film, which contributed greatly to the undoing of the government’s official explanation. I recite this list to suggest that I am not among those who believe there is nothing important or interesting to say anymore about Lee Harvey Oswald’s murder of John F. Kennedy. I am an assassination buff just as surely as the most devoted conspiracy theorist and have my own vested interest in continued public fascination.

I wasn’t surprised by the hoopla surrounding the October release or the feeble understanding of what the ARRB was all about and why a small number of documents had been deferred for release. Yet as Jack Schlossberg observed in *Time*—and presumably he has more than a passing interest in the assassination of his grandfather—the files contain “no particularly revealing or transformative insights: A newsworthy story without much newsworthy information.”

Still, I would argue that something is different about this latest installment in the long-running assassination saga. To research and write about the Kennedy assassination is to go through the looking-glass, to a world where words mean whatever the filmmaker or author uttering them decides they mean. It is downright nauseating to sit through a presentation by Oliver Stone at a research conference. But it used to be that I could compartmentalize the madness, keep it in its corner. When I left the event where Stone spoke or got up from my desk after a day of writing about the assassination, I could count on reentering a world where sanity prevailed.

Now, given a president who cites the *National Enquirer* to suggest that a U.S. senator’s father was involved with Kennedy’s murderer; leans on advice from someone like Roger Stone, who believes Lyndon Johnson orchestrated the assassination; and accepts the word of Vladimir Putin, who insinuates that the CIA killed Kennedy, there is no safe space.

The old saw that good information eventually crowds out bad doesn’t seem to work anymore. Reality is optional everywhere. ♦