

The Riddle of Lee Harvey Oswald

The Oswalds: An Untold Account of Marina and Lee

Paul R. Gregory

Diversion. 280 pp. \$21.80

By Richard A. Reiman

There are mysteries about the assassination of President Kennedy, but among those likely to bedevil historians a hundred years after the assassination, the endurance of just one is certain. It has nothing to do with grainy images from the Zapruder film, trajectories from the sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository, or bullet shots, be they “magic” or prosaic. It is the motivation, in full, of Lee Harvey Oswald for assassinating JFK. The question suffers from an overabundance, not a paucity, of possible answers, conjoined with the portrait of a man who planned for greatness while sharing almost nothing with anyone what he was about. If, while Oswald lived, someone might have both desired and attempted to spend time with this hostile, hyper-suspicious fantasist, and possessed the wit to probe his politics or personality, the chances were overwhelming that the door, metaphorically speaking, would have been slammed in his face.

Equally improbable would be that someone possessing these credentials would step forward for the first time after nearly sixty years, extensively and shrewdly summarizing all that he had learned.

Enter Paul R. Gregory and *The Oswalds: An Untold Account of Marina and Lee*. Gregory’s brush with Marina and Lee occurred on the precipice of an academic career of international scope and distinction. Between earning a doctorate in economics at Harvard in 1969 and authoring this model of a restricted “life and times,” he wrote or co-wrote more than twelve books and one hundred articles on the fields of Russia’s economy and energy sector. His fluency in some of the psychodramas of Soviet history (his books include such titles as *Lenin’s Brain*, and *Politics, Murder and Love in Stalin’s Kremlin*) suggests the interesting possibility that either his later work was informed by his early acquaintance with psychosis personified, or that the subject of this book and its mysteries were retroactively illuminated by his subsequent education in the enigmatic riddles of Russia.

Gregory was 21 years old when he met Lee Oswald in June 1962, two weeks after Oswald, recently returned from the Soviet Union, had sought the help of Paul’s father, Peter, in

Washington Decoded

finding a job. The elder Gregory, that rarest of things in Cold War Fort Worth—a Russian translator—had positively evaluated Oswald’s Russian language proficiency at Oswald’s request. Interested in meeting Marina, Peter had brought Paul along to visit the couple at Robert Oswald’s home. Soon, Paul was arranging for language tutoring from Marina over the last two months of his summer hiatus from the University of Oklahoma. The Gregorys (father, mother and Paul) also hosted a dinner for the Oswalds on August 25, attended by two Russian émigrés from Dallas, George Bouhe and Anna Meller. Aside from these contacts, Paul met the Oswalds only one more time: on November 22, 1962, when he drove them to a bus stop back to Dallas from their Thanksgiving family reunion with Lee’s brother and half-brother, one year to the day before the assassination.

While Oswald’s translation job never materialized (none existed in Fort Worth), Gregory makes a good case that Oswald’s marriage and mental health were fatally knocked off kilter by a months-long chain of events tracking directly back to the Gregory connection. Peter Gregory introduced the Oswalds to the Dallas émigrés, who proceeded to deconstruct the Potemkin village-like life that Lee had built ostensibly for Marina but really for himself. The fiction that all Americans lived lives as stunted as the Oswalds; that Lee could long deny Marina the escape hatch of English proficiency; that America would recognize Lee as an unsung revolutionary writer; and that somehow his existentially important mastery over Marina might be indefinitely maintained, all crumbled before the influence of the émigrés.

Gregory mentions the *Rashomon*-like character of the testimony before the Warren Commission from the attendees at the August dinner. Bouhe, Meller and the Gregorys, father and son, all recalled it differently. What he further reveals in *The Oswalds*, perhaps unconsciously, are *Rashomon* memories of his own, starting with determined efforts at forgetting, only to be interrupted by turns with subtly altered memories of still-earlier recollections. He shares this, of course, with a cohort of millions of his own generation, who had to place their own traumatic memories of those four dark days in suspension before a later confrontation in the 1980s, a decade of global confrontation with the past. Gregory had the added weight, which none of the rest of us have, of having to contend with memories inconveniently engraved in stone by his testimony of the 1960s and his later assistance to Priscilla Johnson McMillan, also documented for all time in her classic contribution to Oswaldiana, *Marina and Lee* (1977). The result is the kind of granular reconfiguration of memory at a hyper level beyond the degree to which we humans are ordinarily prone. The inevitable changes that result tend to convince conspiracy theorists that something most foul must be afoot, while revealing also the reality that, like evidence, most memories both personal and official, at the level of significant evidence, tend to align quite closely.

One instance of metamorphosing memory is Gregory’s description of the 5 January 1962 issue of *Time* magazine, seen on the Oswald coffee table across all the tutoring sessions with Marina the following summer. Being *Time*’s “Man of the Year” issue, it featured President Kennedy, with a dramatic cover portrait by the Italian painter Pietro Annigoni. In his testimony before the Warren Commission, Gregory said a copy of *Life* magazine was “always in [Oswald’s] living room, and it had Kennedy’s picture on it, or I believe Kennedy or someone else . . .” He mentioned no other magazine, and McMillan also mentioned only *Life* magazine as an artifact of the Mercedes Street living room, suggesting she learned this from Gregory in the 1970s. It is commonly argued that recent memories are more reliable than distant ones. Still, there is no reason why sustained thought about an impression originally so trivial could not produce a more accurate memory. The recollection is dramatic, but also of some importance. It reinforces the trope that Oswald admired Kennedy—or envied him. JFK’s popularity, reported *Time*, “compares

Washington Decoded

favorably with such popular heroes as Franklin Roosevelt and Dwight Eisenhower,” the latter a president Oswald had once aspired to assassinate. All this piles speculation on speculation given the vagaries of memory, but much other evidence suggested that Oswald mingled jealousy, resentment, and a sense of twisted identification with JFK, the man with the “biggest” political job in the world and the support of “78%” of Americans. Nothing in Gregory’s book weakens the plausibility of such a connection.

Most readers familiar with the record of Gregory’s brief encounters with the Oswalds in 1962 are likely to anticipate his most important contributions to be his assessment of Oswald’s personality and character. What can he add to the questions of Oswald’s capacity for participating in conspiracies or killing the president all alone?

Gregory recalls that in 1962 he never saw anything in Oswald that suggested he was capable of political violence, or of coordinating with others in any activity so sustained as a conspiracy, much less a plot to assassinate a president. Upon first learning that Oswald was a suspect in JFK’s murder, he thought that it was some kind of error. (He assumed that Oswald was mistakenly picked up because he was a former defector). Yet, within days, after just a short period of weighing evidence and putting together the totality of his encounters with Oswald, he unreservedly concluded that the Oswald he knew was fully capable of attempting and achieving the assassination without outside help. This suggests that, partly due to the common run of experience and perhaps human psychology, we see murderers as people whom others encounter, not ourselves. When evidence forces us to see the truth, only then do we see that the evidence to the contrary was always there.

Gregory’s Oswald is much the same character we get in Priscilla McMillan’s pivotal book, *Marina and Lee*. He is a man who never seems to “fail to fail” at the tests that serve as standards for success in ordinary life—education, earnings, stable employment, and upward mobility—but who was uncannily skillful at manipulating individuals, groups, and even states to serve his egocentric purposes. McMillan observes that the conspiracists “scandalously maligned the motives of Kennedy’s successor, rather than take a hard look at the man who actually did it,” doing “more to poison American political life than Lee Oswald—with the most terrible of intentions—was able to do.” Gregory would wholeheartedly agree.

In the end, there are three Oswalds who populate the chronology of his life. Unlike the doppelgangers of conspiracist literature, these three actually existed within the same man. First, there was Oswald the “planner,” the man who took months to plan his defection to the Soviet Union, his return to the United States, and later attempt the killing of Major General (Ret.) Edwin A. Walker, with the painstaking planning distracting him from his otherwise pedestrian existence. Second in succession was Oswald the man capable of spontaneous violence, whether that might mean attempting suicide in the USSR to remain there, raining blows upon Marina to control her, or murdering Officer J.D. Tippit in a mad dash to escape Dallas. The third Oswald, the one who lived last, was a man capable of a simultaneity of both violence and careful calculation, spontaneously deciding on the murder of JFK with only days or even hours remaining before the Dallas motorcade, but planning carefully within those limits.

From his personal experience, the reason for his book, Gregory never knew the man who killed President Kennedy. He knew only the planner, who seemed politically obsessed but drawn merely to political activism of a peaceful sort, if coupled with passive-aggressive internal frustration and sullenness. He witnessed one of Oswald’s most egregious acts of spousal abuse,

Washington Decoded

but it did not stop him at the time from seeing the man as an acquaintance whom he wanted to continue to help.

Likely to be an unnoted strength of the book is that Gregory seamlessly weaves together the account of the memoirist and the historian. He contextualizes the twelve weeks or so when he was a passing acquaintance of Oswald with Oswald's earlier background, life in the Soviet Union, and later combination of murderous and political activity in 1963. Thanks to his wide familiarity with Oswald scholarship and his keen analysis of the same, Gregory has the same sure grasp upon these periods of Oswald's life, which he never witnessed, as he does with his personal experiences. Equally important, the things he witnessed, as well as the things he only later learned, harmonize with one another and emerge more clearly than ever as the logical acts of the same man.

And so, what we get from the whole of *The Oswalds*, strangely enough, are concise yet comprehensive answers to the assassination's contradictory questions: Why did Oswald decide to kill a liberal when he was a communist, and how did he manage to kill a president when he was a failure? It is an explanation whose scaffolding we have seen before: the desire to be a world-historical force for change if he could not be a leader, the private puppeteer whose crafty string-pulling of nations and individuals went largely unnoticed. In the final analysis, Gregory's knowing assessment could now be supplied by any close, intelligent reader of the extant "mainstream" JFK scholarship. Thanks to his refined education, disciplined critical thinking, and three-score years of experience with that scholarship, far more than from having known Lee Harvey Oswald, Paul Gregory gets it right. He introduces us not so much to the man he knew in 1962 as the man we all can see in 2023.

Richard A. Reiman is a professor of history at South Georgia State College and the author of "Six 'Shots' in Dallas: 'Framing' the Perpetrator of the Kennedy Assassination through the Zapruder Film, 1963-2013," Journal of Perpetrator Research (2019). This is his first article for Washington Decoded.

©2023 by Richard A. Reiman