

After Thirty Years: Making Sense of the Assassination

By Max Holland

In the context of other books about the JFK assassination, *Deep Politics* by Peter Dale Scott is an unremarkable work. The field already brims with books that conjure up fantastic conspiracies through innuendo, presumption, and pseudo-scholarship while ignoring provable but inconvenient facts. *Deep Politics* is simply another addition to this literature. Yet there remains something truly remarkable and disturbing about *Deep Politics*, and it's not that a tenured English professor wrote its opaque prose. Rather it's that *Deep Politics* is a University of California Press book. According to the UC publicity office, this means an editorial committee consisting of 20 UC professors, including four senior historians, approved *Deep Politics* for publication. This peer approval by a major university press illustrates the boundless and utter disbelief in the *Warren Report* that exists even in the highest reaches of the academy, and it also reveals the gross inattention given to the subject by serious historians.

It's instructive to compare scholars' treatment of the JFK assassination with their output and stance toward the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the other event in recent history that seared the national consciousness. Like the assassination, the attack was the subject of an executive branch investigation followed by a separate congressional investigation. Like the assassination, conspiratorial theories about the surprise attack (mainly, that FDR knew in advance) have always dogged the official story. By and large, historians have promptly exposed distortions of the documentary record and faulty logic, thereby relegating December 7th conspiracy theories to the political fringes where they belong. In stark contrast, historians have forged nothing close to a consensus on the assassination; in fact their voice is rarely raised. Very few of the more than 450 books and tens of thousands of articles that compose the vast assassination literature published since 1964 have been written by historians. And when they do write about the Kennedy presidency history becomes bifurcated. The assassination is treated as a footnote or afterthought if it is addressed at all. Consequently, the field is left by default to the fevered imagination of authors like Peter Dale Scott, who banks on what H.L. Mencken once called "the virulence of the national appetite for bogus revelation."

Future historians will have to account for this abdication because it carries a meaning, just as the hound who didn't bark in unlocked Sherlock Holmes's Baskerville mystery. Of course, in one sense it is too easy to understand why historians have steered clear of the controversy. Any assassination buff worth his or her salt will gladly stupefy a historian with countless variations on the *Warren Report* or altogether different theories. And any historian who delves deeply into the literature does so at considerable risk to his or her own sanity. JFK assassination literature is the contemporary strain of the resilient paranoid style in American politics, defined so memorably by Richard Hofstadter 30

years ago. Or as one wag remarked after seeing Oliver Stone's *JFK*, which feverishly wove several published theories into a meta-conspiracy, it was hard to leave the theater without momentarily double-checking your own whereabouts on 22 November 1963.

The disbelief attached to the *Warren Report* has to be grounded in unfinished business, some yearning that goes well beyond narrow questions like whether all pertinent government documents have been released. In a letter to *The New York Times* last year, William Manchester skillfully identified this unrequited need as well as anyone ever has. The author of *Death of a President* wrote,

. . . To employ what may seem an odd metaphor, there is an esthetic principle here. If you put six million dead Jews on one side of a scale and on the other side put the Nazi regime--the greatest gang of criminals ever to seize control of a modern state--you have a rough balance: greatest crime, greatest criminals.

But if you put the murdered President of the United States on one side of a scale and that wretched waif Oswald on the other side, it doesn't balance. You want to add something weightier to Oswald. It would invest the President's death with meaning, endowing him with martyrdom. He would have died for *something*.

A conspiracy would, of course, do the job nicely.

The desire to invest a national trauma with meaning was not something which developed gradually. It was evident within minutes of Kennedy's death, as *Death of a President* vividly chronicles. Dallas was a fount of right-wing activity dating back to the 1920s, when it was known as "the Southwest hate capital of Dixie." That reputation, plus the rough reception accorded U.N. ambassador Adlai Stevenson in October, prompted anguished presidential aides to assert that unspecified right-wingers were responsible in the hours right after the assassination. And once Oswald was arrested, there was a marked reluctance to shift the blame from ultraconservatives to a self-styled Marxist; in America, a liberal President being assassinated by a Marxist seemed to make no sense. Jacqueline Kennedy's first reaction, upon being told by Robert Kennedy of Oswald's background, was to feel sickened because she immediately sensed Oswald robbed JFK of martyrdom. "He didn't even have the satisfaction of being killed for civil rights," Mrs. Kennedy said, according to Manchester. "It's--it had to be some silly little Communist." Significantly, the search for meaning extended outside the immediate Kennedy circle too. It can be seen in such minor details as the media's use of Oswald's middle name, as if employing it gave him more stature. Prior to that Friday, no one called him Lee *Harvey* Oswald.

If great events demand great causes, as Manchester argues, thirst for a conspiracy will never be satisfied so long as Oswald stands as he does now. He is unequal to the task of assassinating a President who, fairly or not, is more esteemed in public opinion polls than Abraham Lincoln or Franklin Roosevelt. But perhaps 30 years is sufficient time to re-

examine this imbalance, if possible adjust the scales, and make the assassination coherent. In addition to the sheer passage of time, last November marked the first major anniversary since the geo-political rules changed and with them exaggerated passions and fears. New documentary evidence, not only about the assassination but also Kennedy's Cuba policy, has been released, and many principal officials are talking, some after a long silence. It is more than just possible that our understanding of the assassination, like so much else, has been clouded by cold war exigencies.

Of course, it's fashionable now to throw up one's hands at the slightest mention of November 22nd, and suggest that the truth is unknowable. But one might just as well assert that history doesn't matter. It is past time to incorporate the assassination into post-war history instead of treating the event as some unfathomable crossroads.

In his first *Weekly* published after the assassination, the independent journalist I.F. Stone wrote a piercing column on the fallen President entitled "We All Had a Finger on That Trigger."

Let us ask ourselves honest questions. How many Americans have not assumed--with approval--that the CIA was probably trying to find a way to assassinate Castro? How many would not applaud if the CIA succeeded? Have we not become conditioned to the notion that we should have a secret agency of government--the CIA--with secret funds, to wield the dagger beneath the cloak against leaders we dislike? Even some of our best young liberal intellectuals can see nothing wrong in this picture except that the 'operational' functions of CIA should be kept separate from its intelligence evaluations! . . . When the right to kill is so universally accepted, we should not be surprised if our young President was slain. It is not just the ease in obtaining guns, it is the ease in obtaining excuses, that fosters assassination.

Drawing a rhetorical, unproven connection between the cold war mindset and Oswald's stunning act was vintage Stone. With virtually every American still in shock, or blinded by the fairy tale quality of the funeral, it took a habitual dissenter to hold up the assassination against a backdrop of political violence contributed to by the United States. The only political leader who dared do so was Malcolm X. He pointedly refused to utter consoling words, calling the assassination a case of "chickens coming home to roost." At the time the remark only served to justify his reputation as an cold-eyed extremist. In retrospect, however, I.F. Stone and Malcolm X were closer to identifying the context of the assassination than anyone at the time.

The full story is a bipartisan one and properly begins in the waning years of the Eisenhower Administration, when the correlation of forces seemed to be turning against the West at the core and periphery of the postwar struggle. In Europe, the Soviets appeared determined to alter the status of Berlin unilaterally and a more threatening development was impossible to imagine, short of armed attack. Simultaneously, the postwar revolutionary tide that had begun in China, and was barely checked in Korea, seemed poised to sweep through Africa, Southeast Asia, and even into Latin America. Patrice Lumumba was ostensibly paving the way for a hostile takeover of the richly-endowed Belgian Congo; in Asia, Ho Chi Minh had designs on the balance of Vietnam; and in America's backyard, Fidel Castro was on the brink of taking power from Juan Batista. In the midst of all this ferment Moscow and Washington were rapidly developing ICBMs that could obliterate both capitals in fifteen minutes.

In [a review article in *The Nation*](#), Holland discusses how the recent release of documents under the aegis of the Assassination Records Review Board has affected how we view various issues.

The Eisenhower Administration was hardly shy about subverting unsympathetic Third World regimes, and uncounted soldiers and civilians died during CIA-backed shadow wars and coups in the 1950s. But the trend apparent in 1959 raised a new question: if thousands of deaths were acceptable, why not the murder of particular persons? It might be a less costly way to nip unfriendly regimes in the bud, or on occasion, oust a repressive but pro-Western ruler who might engender a communist takeover. Perhaps Eisenhower was swayed by the tactics of the KGB, which occasionally used assassination--called "wet affairs"--to eliminate hostile emigre leaders and important defectors. In any case, "executive action," the assassination of actual or potential leaders deemed inimical, was added to the CIA's bag of covert tactics. In fragmented and frequently violent Third World polities, executive action appeared quite feasible, the rewards worthwhile, the risks tolerable.

In 1960, the consideration of four political murders became elements of wider covert operations designed to influence outcomes in the Congo, Iraq, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. The respective targets were Lumumba, Abdul Kassem, Rafael Trujillo, and Castro, who became a target of special urgency. If Castro's radicalism succeeded Cuba promised to become a model for other Latin revolutionaries, a bridgehead for Soviet subversion in the hemisphere, and a platform for signals intelligence facilities targeted against the United States. A major operational base in America's backyard was Washington's worst nightmare, and something the Kremlin had never dreamed possible.

By the time DCI Allen Dulles was giving briefings to President-elect Kennedy, Lumumba and Kassem had been "neutralized" though not as pure result of the CIA's plotting. Kennedy needed little convincing about the continuing need to act with similar resolve in the Caribbean. He was highly impressed with the CIA's ability to bend events in Third World countries, and covert operations were in keeping with the action-oriented pursuit of the cold war he intended. More to the point, during the 1960 campaign Kennedy had updated the "who lost China" debate by suggesting that Castro's rise to

power was a clear symbol of America's decline under Eisenhower. So eradicating Castro's Cuba while simultaneously preventing another one became a centerpiece of Kennedy's Latin American policy from the moment he took office.

Assassinating Castro was only one element, of course, in a far larger scheme to invade Cuba in the spring of 1961 and foment a counter-revolution. But the Bay of Pigs invasion proved a debacle and left Kennedy livid over the embarrassment caused his infant Administration. Heads had to roll, and the President toyed with the idea of replacing Allen Dulles with Attorney General Robert Kennedy. Instead, he ordered his most trusted confidant and advisor to poke around the Agency and find out what had gone wrong. Operating with his usual zeal Robert Kennedy quickly immersed himself in Agency affairs, and as he came to understand the CIA's capabilities he emerged its most ardent champion. Little more than a month after the Bay of Pigs this judgment was seemingly confirmed. Dominican dissidents in contact with the Agency assassinated Trujillo, and U.S. objectives were achieved with plausible deniability intact. The Agency, properly used, again seemed invaluable.

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. Precisely because the Bay of Pigs was such a catastrophe JFK became more determined than ever to see Castro deposed. By November 1961, another covert plan, under the umbrella code-name of MONGOOSE, was moving into high gear. This time the plan was to destabilize Castro's regime rather than suddenly overthrow it. In concert with overtly hostile diplomatic and economic policies, every possible covert tactic would be brought to bear, including paramilitary sabotage, psychological warfare, and assassination. But the Agency did not have free rein. This time President Kennedy installed his brother as a kind of czar over the entire operation, in effect the unofficial but unmistakable overseer (with respect to Cuba) of the Agency's Directorate of Plans, the covert action shop then run by Richard Helms. Robert Kennedy was there both to keep the pressure on and to guard against any unpleasant surprises. As 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 a fixation for Robert Kennedy. At one of the first meetings, RFK told assembled officials that his brother "really wanted action" and that "no time, money, effort, or manpower is to be spared." Robert Kennedy made field trips to MONGOOSE facilities in Florida, and if a sabotage raid was scheduled he insisted on knowing such details as what sidearms the exiles would be carrying. RFK's micro-management extended to almost daily telephone conversations with Richard Helms, during which the Attorney General applied "white heat" pressure. As Helms recalled in

1975 before a Senate subcommittee, “It was made abundantly clear . . . that the desire was to get rid of the Castro regime and to get rid of Castro . . . no limitations were put on this injunction.”

MONGOOSE did not envision U.S. military intervention until an internal revolt erupted, but this tactical distinction was lost on Castro. He daily excoriated the Yankee imperialists and appealed to Moscow for tangible help against what he feared was an imminent invasion. In Nikita Khrushchev he found a sympathetic listener. Initially, the Soviets had been wary of supporting Castro. He was not a card-carrying member of the Cuban Communist Party when he rode into Havana, and the Kremlin doubted his staying power given U.S. influence and sensitivity over events in the Caribbean. But the threat of another U.S.-backed invasion, and more importantly, the opportunity to redress a strategic nuclear imbalance, persuaded Khrushchev to forego caution and order a Soviet military build-up in Cuba in 1962.

Nothing about the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis need concern us except the endgame. Initially, a U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba was part of a package deal that involved the withdrawal of the Soviet missiles in return for an American pledge to remove Jupiter missiles from Turkey. But once the crisis fever broke, the Kennedy Administration decided it had no interest in granting Castro immunity. “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 declassified only last year. Although some Kennedy advisors now advocated trying to wean Castro from the Soviets because he was smarting over their “betrayal,” ultimately a more modest program of covert subversion was reintroduced in mid-1963. As before it included the tactic of “neutralizing” Castro.

By late 1963, Castro had been the target of more than a dozen assassination plots (by his count) since coming to power. Eight separate attempts were linked in some way to the CIA, while Cuban exiles acting independently were responsible for the balance. All the attempts were plagued by informers, incompetence, and Castro’s plain good luck.

Still, Castro did not like the odds. On 7 September 1963, during a reception at the Brazilian embassy in Havana, he gave an impromptu three-hour interview to an Associated Press correspondent. Largely devoted to vehement denunciations of U.S. policy and its maker, the interview also included an express warning against assassination plots directed at Cuban officials. “We are prepared to fight them and answer in kind,” Castro said. “United States leaders should think that if they are aiding terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders they themselves will not be safe.”

The leading newspaper in New Orleans, the *Times-Picayune*, was among the U.S. newspapers that picked up Castro’s unusual interview with an American wire service. It ran as a three-column, page 7 story on September 9th. In all New Orleans, no one was more likely to be interested in what Castro had to say than the city’s most ardent supporter of the Cuban revolution, a newcomer named Lee Oswald.

Ascribing a political motive to Oswald doesn't hinge on whether he read one newspaper article, though in all likelihood he did. Because of his politics he was extraordinarily sensitive to the hostile U.S. policy toward Cuba, as two undeservedly neglected biographies (Priscilla McMillan's 1977 *Marina and Lee* and Jean Davison's 1983 *Oswald's Game*) have persuasively argued and documented. In a profound sense, Oswald was only marginally less informed than, say, John McCone, about the furious effort to overthrow Castro. Diplomatic efforts to isolate Cuba--such as throwing it out of the OAS in 1962--were a matter of public record. So was the attempt to make the Cuban economy scream via a trade embargo, tightened considerably in 1961 by Kennedy and again in 1962. The Bay of Pigs proved U.S. antipathy went well beyond conventional containment while MONGOOSE and subsequent operations generated a lot of "noise" in the press, particularly in the extreme left-wing periodicals Oswald read devoutly like *The Militant*. Anyone who monitored Radio Havana, organized his very own "Fair Play for Cuba Committee" chapter, and marched around New Orleans with a placard that read "Hands off Cuba" was aware of all this.

Of equal moment, by 1963 Oswald had twice demonstrated the capacity to inflict violence against himself or others. In 1959, he slit his wrist after Soviet authorities refused to welcome him as a defector despite his offer to share information about U.S. radar data. Even more significant was his attempted assassination of a right-wing general named Edwin Walker in early 1963. Oswald had returned to America in June 1962, having left the Soviet Union because it turned out to be no better than his homeland. In his own mind he remained a committed Marxist though, with a decided taste for self-spun intrigue and drama. Coincidentally, one of the most outspoken American opponents of communism was living in the same city Oswald moved to upon his return. Edwin Walker, a highly decorated major general, had resigned in November 1961 after distributing John Birch Society literature to U.S. troops in West Germany. Dallas then became his command post for right-wing activities, and in February 1963 the local media were full of stories about his decision to join evangelist Billy James Hargis in "Operation Midnight Ride," a 5-week national tour dedicated to fighting communism.

Oswald put Walker under surveillance after these news stories appeared, and in early March ordered a Mannlicher-Carcano rifle through the mail under an alias. Over the next few weeks he quietly stalked the general while waiting for the rifle to arrive. When it did, Oswald asked his wife Marina to take the infamous picture of him in their backyard. He intended to send a photo to *The Militant*, the Socialist Workers paper, to show them he was "ready for anything." Two weeks later, on April 10th, he attempted to assassinate Walker as the general sat in his living room, working on his taxes. The next morning Oswald turned on the radio fully expecting to hear that Walker had been shot to death. He was still alive. "I missed," a crestfallen Oswald said to his wife.

That summer Oswald moved with his wife and daughter to New Orleans to make a fresh start. There his concern for Castro became all-consuming. Cuba was the pure embodiment of communist ideology, the truly revolutionary country. He fancied himself a Castro operative and tried to infiltrate an anti-Castro group. He started his "Fair Play" chapter, forging signatures to make it look like there was more than one member. And for

the first time since his 1959 defection, his efforts brought him the kind of attention he thought he deserved all along. After walking the streets of New Orleans with his “Hands off Cuba” placard, to his immense satisfaction a local TV news show aired his protest for two minutes. He was even arrested after getting into a fracas with an anti-communist Cuban, Carlos Bringuier, whose group he had tried to infiltrate days earlier.

When the *Times-Picayune* published Castro’s September 7th denunciation of U.S. policy and his warning, it was one of the most prominent news article then published about CIA-supported covert operations, but far from the only one in New Orleans. Oswald developed a new impulse--he had to get to Cuba immediately, to help defend a revolution that seemed in imminent danger again. He arranged to send his family back to Dallas, and on September 25th, left for Mexico City and the Cuban embassy there.

Oswald presented himself as a “friend of Cuba,” but justifiably suspicious of all North Americans, the Cuban consul refused to issue him a visa. Oswald returned to Dallas nearly penniless and embittered at not being recognized for who he truly was. After two weeks of job-hunting a friend of Marina’s got him a job at the Texas School Book Depository as an order filler. By now, Dallas newspapers were reporting almost daily about the impending visit of President Kennedy to Texas, though details about the itinerary were still sketchy. The opportunity to subject Kennedy to the same dangers plaguing Castro was slowly forming itself. On November 19th the *Times-Herald* described the precise route President Kennedy would take through downtown Dallas. Shortly after noon, the motorcade was going to pass by the building where Oswald had been working for a month.

Having failed to kill Walker, Oswald “was suddenly faced with the possibility of having a much greater impact on history,” as Gerald Posner writes. What finally catalyzed Oswald to act is impossible to know or prove. But in the two earlier instances where he actually took violent action--as opposed to imagining or talking about it--his proximate motive was manifestly political. Whenever he acted out his internal demons violently, it was on a political stage. Nor was his desire to prove his central importance to family and friends, and his drive to be recognized as a revolutionary capable of the daring act, mutually exclusive. In fact everything must have seemed terrifyingly reinforcing. All his life was a rehearsal for this opportunity, this moment. Or as Brandeis University professor Jacob Cohen has written, “The same fantasist who went to the Soviet Union expecting to be accepted as a hero . . . now thought, incoherently, stupidly, that he would become a hero in Cuba as the assassin of Castro’s enemies.”

On the morning of November 22nd Oswald took his rifle, retrieved just the night before, to the Depository wrapped in brown paper. He told a co-worker that the package contained curtain rods. Shortly after noon he took up his post on the sixth floor and as the motorcade passed he fired three shots. A tree branch deflected the first bullet but the rifle crack prompted Governor John Connally to twist his torso to look over his right shoulder. The second hit Kennedy at the base of his neck and then plowed into and through Connally’s right side. As Connally keeled over and shouted, “My God, they are going to

kill us all,” the third and fatal bullet struck Kennedy, propped up by his back brace, in the head.

As journalist Daniel Schorr later put it, a bit more delicately than Malcolm X, “An arrow launched into the air to kill a foreign leader may well have fallen back to kill our own.” When Lyndon Johnson announced the formation of a presidential commission to investigate the assassination, no one had more reason to suspect this awful truth, and be burdened by it, than the slain President’s brother.

Coming to terms with the assassination means making the aftermath as coherent as the event itself. Neither half is fully understandable without the other. The same world-view, the identical blindspots and imperatives that unforeseeably yielded Oswald also governed the aftermath of the assassination, most importantly the official investigation.

Clearly, the Warren Commission is the most difficult aspect to come to terms with. On the one hand President Johnson created the Commission with an express mandate to get to the bottom of the assassination. It was headed by then-Chief Justice Earl Warren, whose reputation for probity was nearly unmatched, and several commissioners were singularly versed in intelligence and national security affairs, notably Allen Dulles and John McCloy. On the other hand, a decade after publication of the Warren Report it became known that government officials who had vital information pertaining to the investigation willfully deceived the Commission.[\[1\]](#)

Is it possible to square this circle, and still arrive at the same basic finding as the Warren Commission?

First, the logic of those officials who withheld critical secrets must be understood. From their perspective neither the magnitude of the national trauma or the Commission’s mandate invalidated normal CIA procedures. Plausible deniability and compartmentation of information still applied to *past* and *ongoing* plots against Castro as well as other sanctioned covert activities directed against his regime. If the Commission demonstrated an unambiguous need to know about the assassination plots, the question of what to do would have to be faced. But until and unless that happened, the information would never be volunteered even if it went to the heart of Oswald’s motive.

Looked at another way, the CIA only faced a genuine dilemma if the withheld information pointed to someone other than Oswald, or someone acting in concert with him. The Warren Commission could not deliver to the American people and the world a false conclusion. But if the withheld information was congruent with a finding that Oswald was the lone assassin--and it only bolstered that--the Agency had every reason not to depart from ingrained practices. The Warren Commission would still reach the correct conclusion though denied important supporting information, and the CIA could keep its deep dark secrets.

Consequently, the CIA was quite cooperative about responding to certain kinds of requests submitted by the Warren Commission staff. On more than one occasion it volunteered information the Commission was unaware existed but had a demonstrated need to know, even if the information came from such as highly secret means as eavesdropping or mail intercepts. And when a KGB lieutenant colonel named Yuri Nosenko defected in mid-1964 with important testimony about Oswald's (non-existent) links to the KGB, the Commission was made thoroughly aware of this development.[\[2\]](#)

But Richard Helms, who was both knowledgeable about the anti-Castro plots and the highest-ranking CIA official in close contact with the Commission, refused to volunteer anything about the efforts at assassination or general covert operations directed against Cuba. The fact that these operations were compartmented inside CIA helped Helms deflect Commission staff from leads that threatened to get into sensitive areas. As Helms later explained his actions to a congressional committee, he did not believe that plots were relevant to the Commission's inquiry.

When the *Warren Report* was published in September 1964 it presented a portrait of the assassin as resentful loner. Although highly politicized, Oswald acted upon feelings of alienation, resentment, and because his marriage was in trouble, but without acute political reason. Of course, part of the problem was that Jack Ruby murdered Oswald before he would confess. During twelve hours of questioning, Oswald fell silent or lied with that confidence peculiar to sociopaths whenever he was confronted with hard evidence tying him to the assassination. No, he said, that wasn't him in the picture holding a Mannlicher-Carcano rifle; 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. Oswald "was so smug in the way he dealt with the questions," recalled the assistant district attorney, "[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 Abt, a New York lawyer known for his defense of leading American Communist Party figures.

Absent a confession, and denied CIA information that shed light on Oswald's motives, the Commission staff decided that it could not ascribe to Oswald "any one motive or group of motives." The *Report* gave ample details about Oswald's political activities but in a detached, clinical manner. In the end, he was left to become Manchester's wretched waif, a callow non-entity trying to elbow his way into history by striking out at a President who had it all: looks, youth, and power. Not untrue perhaps, but it was a hollow explanation given Oswald's extreme politicization. As staff member (now Ohio state judge) Burt Griffin later remarked, "The fact that we could not come up with a motive for Oswald was a great weakness in the report."

The CIA has been roundly condemned for withholding pertinent information from the Commission staff. But consider the role played by the only individual outside the Agency with clear knowledge about the anti-Castro plotting, an individual who also had the standing and power to bring any information he wished to the Commission's attention.

What did Robert Kennedy do while the Warren Commission conducted its investigation, a period during which he remained Attorney General?

For the most part, Robert Kennedy studiously avoided the Warren Commission, as if “he did not want the questions pressed too hard for fear of the answers he might get,” according to the family biography *The Kennedys*. But on one occasion RFK was specifically requested to come forward with pertinent information, as David Belin, a counsel to the Warren Commission, recounts in *Final Disclosure*. Chief Justice Warren personally wrote Robert Kennedy on 11 June 1964, informing him of the Commission’s progress and asking Kennedy if he was “aware of any additional information relating to the assassination” of his brother “which has not been sent to the Commission.” In particular, Warren emphasized the importance of any information bearing on the question of a domestic or foreign conspiracy.

When Kennedy responded he was no more forthcoming than the CIA. All the information in the possession of the *Justice Department* (emphasis added) has been sent to the Commission, Kennedy wrote, which was a restrictive interpretation of Warren’s request and inaccurate anyway, since Kennedy knew the FBI was aware of some of the assassination plots. RFK went on to say 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”

Kennedy’s outward mien during these months comports with what might be expected of a man tortured by knowledge he, almost alone, carried. William Manchester reports that many of the Kennedy clan were crushed by the assassination but then righted themselves after the funeral. But during the spring of 1964, a “brooding Celtic agony . . . darken[ed] Kennedy’s life.” He was non-functional for hours at a time and to those closest to him seemed almost in physical pain. What genuinely sent him reeling? The “tragedy without reason” of his brother’s death, as RFK’s biographer, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. later put it? Or was the death, topped by the shattering realization that somehow, the Kennedys’ fixation on Castro had inadvertently motivated a political psychopath? During these black months Robert Kennedy exhibited a great interest in the work of Greek tragedians, underlining one passage from Aeschylus: “All arrogance will reap a harvest rich in tears. God calls men to a heavy reckoning for overweening pride.”

David Belin provides a further clue in *Final Disclosure*. He recounts his 1975 conversation with John McCone, after news of the assassination plots finally surfaced along with Robert Kennedy’s contemporaneous oversight of those plans. As Belin describes,

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, although they did have a close relationship [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.

If the CIA is to be blamed for effectively lying by omission, then surely Robert Kennedy deserves similar censure for not divulging everything he knew to the Warren Commission. By withholding information that went to Oswald's motive, Robert Kennedy helped prepare the stage for later revelations that condemned the *Warren Report* to disbelief.

Given all this dissembling, how should the Commission's 888-page report be remembered? Can the omissions be put into perspective, and the Warren Commission given its due? As Gerald Posner makes exhaustively clear, the fact is that Oswald had no accomplices and there was no conspiracy. No information that has come to light since 1964 reasonably allows for any other conclusion. If the word "conspiracy" must be uttered in the same breath as "Kennedy assassination," the only one that existed was the conspiracy to kill Castro and then keep that effort secret after November 22nd.

The *Warren Report* initially accomplished its basic mission of reassuring the public in 1964. Prior to its release, a Gallup poll found that 29 percent of Americans thought Oswald acted alone, while 52 percent believed in some kind of conspiracy. Afterwards, 87 percent of the respondents believed Oswald shot the President, largely because of the widespread praise the Report won in the media. But over the next three decades belief in the Report fell dramatically, and seldom for good reason.

The attacks on the Commission began even before it published its report. Mark Lane, a lawyer retained by Oswald's mother, demonstrated early on the financial and other rewards that could be reaped. (Various editions of his 1966 book, *Rush to Judgment*, have reportedly sold more than one million copies). The critic Dwight Macdonald called Lane a "crude, tireless, and demagogic advocate" for his self-aggrandizing and dishonest criticism, but a similarly low standard has prevailed ever since. By the end of the 1960s, less than a majority of Americans still believed in the *Warren Report* because of critics like Lane, his worthy successor Jim Garrison, *Ramparts* magazine, and the "respectable" critic Edward Jay Epstein, whose book *Inquest* was unfortunately accepted as an important one. Admittedly some frauds, like the Garrison investigation, turned off as many people as they turned on. But on the whole critics began to outnumber persuasive defenders of the official story. The latter included CBS News, which mounted its own investigation and televised the results in over four nights in 1967; Attorney General Ramsey Clark, who organized a panel of forensic pathologists in 1968 to re-examine the autopsy reports; and Dr. Luis W. Alvarez, a Nobel-Laureate physicist who developed some ingenious means of testing the physical evidence. All these efforts corroborated the lone gunman conclusion, yet could not keep pace with what Professor Jacob Cohen has called "platoons of conspiracists [who] concertedly scavenged the record, floating their appalling and thrilling might-have-beens, unfazed by the contradictions and absurdities in their own wantonly selective accounts, often consciously, cunningly deceitful."

Like the assassination itself, the *Warren Report* did not exist apart from history. Mass acceptance of its conclusions was subject to change, especially when Americans general attitude toward the federal government underwent a sea-change over a period of 10 years. Vietnam and then Watergate gradually turned the public's attitude from one of trusting predisposition into a healthy skepticism. So unlike Pearl Harbor, doubts about the official story seemed more plausible with the passage of time, not less. Still, no one came close to guessing the missing truth until the principle of unforeseen consequences came into play again in the mid-1970s.

Watergate created a climate of investigation that finally touched theretofore sacrosanct security agencies. Eventually, press revelations forced Congress to launch its first genuine investigations of the FBI and CIA. Twelve years after the *Warren Report*, first the Rockefeller Commission and then Senator Frank Church's Select Committee revealed the extent of anti-Castro covert operations, including the assassination plots, and the no less damning fact that the FBI and CIA had lied by omission to the Commission. The impact of these revelations is hard to overestimate. The notion that the CIA had dissembled in the midst of a national trauma was incomprehensible to Americans not schooled in the niceties of compartmentalization and the "need to know." If the government could lie to itself in this situation--let alone to the public--then anything seemed possible. Healthy skepticism became corrosive cynicism and a milestone in Americans' disbelief passed by, almost unnoticed. Now the burden of proof shifted decisively and unfairly from critics to *defenders* of the official story.

The difficulty of parsing the truth was compounded by a new round of historical dissembling and denial. This time the exigency was not so much the ongoing cold war, but the reputation of the Kennedys. In the midst of his own hearings, Senator Frank Church promulgated the notion that the C.I.A. was a "rogue elephant rampaging out of control" in the early 1960s, even though the anti-Castro operations were under the tightest presidential control imaginable. Church permitted Kennedy Administration officials to testify in closed session, thus removing them from the glare of television lights. *In camera* testimony also enabled Church to guide the proceedings any time the questions threatened to tighten the link between the Kennedys and the assassination plots. "I will have no part in pointing a finger of guilt toward any former President," Church said. The capstone in liberals' effort to blur the Kennedy brothers' driving role came with the publication of Arthur Schlesinger's RFK biography in 1978. Wrote Schlesinger, "The available evidence clearly leads to the conclusion that the Kennedys did not know about the Castro assassination plots."

Given this manufactured confusion, another official inquiry into the assassination could scarcely be expected to allay suspicion. Thus, it hardly mattered when a House Select Committee, formed in 1976 to re-investigate the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., corroborated every salient fact developed by the Warren Commission.[\[3\]](#)

After a thorough exploration, the Select Committee concluded that the sins of the intelligence community stopped at omission (the role of Robert Kennedy being typically

glossed over). By that time, however, the Pandora's box was wide open. A *Newsweek* poll taken on the 20th anniversary of the assassination showed that 74 percent of Americans believed that "others were involved," while only 11 percent believed Oswald acted alone.

Almost any claim or theory, regardless of how bizarre or insupportable, could now be presented in the same sentence as the *Warren Report's* conclusions and gain credence. The '90s opened with the film *JFK*, mostly a regurgitation of Garrison's theory that Kennedy was murdered because he wanted to end the arms race and U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Hollywood is one thing, but even reputable magazines like *Tikkun* and *The Atlantic* continued to lend the patina of respectability to conspiracy theorists. Last February, for example, *The Atlantic* published a harsh critique of Oliver Stone's movie but by Edward Jay Epstein--a case of the pot calling the kettle black if there ever was one. The *American Historical Review* did no better when it entered the fray. Its April 1992 issue included two articles (out of three) in general praise of *JFK*. "On the complex question of the Kennedy assassination itself," wrote Marcus Raskin in the first article, "the film holds its own against the Warren Commission." The *Warren Report* in fact is not only pitted against the paranoid style, but subject to debates that resemble nothing less than epistemological discussions about the nature, methodology, and limits of knowing.

To be sure, one salutary development occurred as a consequence of *JFK*. In 1992 Congress passed a sweeping law that placed all remaining government documents pertaining to the assassination in a special category, and simultaneously loosened normal classification guidelines. About 98 percent of the documents assembled by the Warren Commission are open, but 2 percent has remained closed and why is a fair question. Is it conceivable that the government has all along been hiding some piece of information that contradicts the *Warren Report*?[\[4\]](#)

If not, what could possible be so secret after thirty years?

But the 2 percent doesn't contradict the *Warren Report*; like the information omitted by the CIA and Robert Kennedy in 1964, it only helps to affirm Oswald's sole guilt. Among that 2 percent is important information derived from signals intelligence and human intelligence sources.[\[5\]](#)

After the assassination, as Richard Helms has said, the U.S. government's immediate inclination was to wonder if the Soviet and/or Cuban governments were somehow involved. Had the KGB, through Oswald, moved to a new level of malevolence? Or had Castro, through Oswald, found a way to carry out his September 7th threat? The National Security Agency, which intercepts communications, went into overdrive to decipher intercepts of conversations, cable traffic, radio and telephone communications at the highest levels of the Soviet and Cuban governments.

Tasks that normally take months were completed in days, as the NSA reviewed intercepts before and immediately after the assassination, looking especially for unusual

messages. Together with information from human sources, the intercepts showed beyond any reasonable doubt that both the Soviet and Cuban leaders were as shocked as anyone by the news from Dallas. “They were frightened,” says one knowledgeable source, “and we knew that.”^[6] The intelligence community’s ability to penetrate Castro’s government was particularly impressive. Within days, it knew that Castro’s public reaction (he was being interviewed by a French journalist when the news came) was a genuine one. Castro was apoplectic at the thought of being blamed for the assassination. With ample reason, he believed Johnson would not hesitate to send in the Marines if LBJ decided Cuba was behind the President’s murder.

Anyone familiar with classification procedures during the cold war will recognize why this information was and is deemed extraordinarily sensitive to this day. The NSA’s capabilities and the methodology of its intercepts are among the most highly guarded of secrets; information gleaned from intercepts is equally protected on the grounds that content inevitably reveals methodology. Even though the intercepts were and are central to proving that Oswald was not the instrument of a foreign power, they have remained classified along with information derived from human sources.

No less significant is the role these intercepts undoubtedly played in the decisions by Helms and Robert Kennedy to withhold information from the commission staff. If no link existed between Oswald and the Soviet and/or Cuban governments, the staff had absolutely no need to know of covert operations directed against Cuba, regardless of how relevant they were to Oswald’s internal equation. It was a politically and institutionally convenient act of denial and dismissal. The disbelief which is now all around us, in other words, was originally sown by officials who willingly disbelieved Oswald’s capacity to comprehend the full extent of American hostility toward Cuba.

The 30th anniversary should have been marked by attempts to integrate the assassination into postwar history. Unfortunately past tendencies still predominate. Compared to Peter Dale Scott’s impenetrable book, Michael Kurtz’s updated edition of *Crime of the Century*, originally published in 1982, seems almost lucid. But the only full-length scholarly study of the Kennedy assassination suffers from an overheated imagination and an unsubstantiated conclusion, namely that Castro (utilizing the Mafia) masterminded a conspiracy that killed JFK. By contrast, Richard Reeves’s biography, *President Kennedy*, continues the tradition of bifurcated histories of the Kennedy administration. Reeves does a commendable job of depicting Kennedy as an unreconstructed cold warrior with respect to Cuba, intent on overthrowing Castro. But this necessary political context is not extended to include Oswald; indeed Oswald isn’t even mentioned in the book, and the assassination remains unfathomable.

Case Closed by Gerald Posner is an example of bifurcation in reverse. He exhaustively and patiently debunks every canard posited to date about the assassination, a worthy but an unenviable task to be sure. Unfortunately, when he doesn't ignore the historical context he clearly misunderstands why things happened as they did, and his book runs out of steam too soon after November 22nd. His obligatory criticism of the Warren Commission (although his conclusion is identical) includes no explanation of why the CIA dissembled before that body, and no mention of Robert Kennedy's role in directing the anti-Castro operations and subsequently obscuring the facts. Posner exhibits glaring ignorance of intelligence and national security *modus operandi* when he writes that the CIA did not keep President Kennedy "fully informed about the assassination plots." The whole elaborate system of plausible deniability was geared so as to leave no evidence linking the President with such plots.

In the wake of Holland's article, Peter Dale Scott wrote an [irate letter to *Reviews in American History*](#). You might wish to read it, and see whether it seriously addresses the issues Holland raised.

The thread common to all three acts in this drama--the events leading up to and including the assassination, the Warren Commission's investigation, and the aftermath--is clearly the cold war. Pull on that thread and primary mysteries unravel. Kennedy's pursuit of the cold war led him to embrace policies initiated under Eisenhower, including the extreme instrument of assassination, and Castro was pursued with demented vigor. Presidential decisions provoked actions, and actions led to consequences, not all anticipated and intended. Castro didn't ask for a champion, but he came unexpectedly in the person of Lee Oswald, a bent personality consumed with ambition and political insight into how the cold war was being waged against Cuba. To Oswald, fair play ultimately meant subjecting Kennedy to the same dangers plaguing Castro.

After Dallas, the cold war defined the exigency for withholding relevant information from the Warren Commission, creating a near-mortal wound to its credibility when Frank Church finally revealed that one arm of government had deceived another. And cold war classifications still keep secret thousands of documents that ultimately will only prove one thing: the Warren Commission got it right. Altogether, the cold war mindset created then perpetuated the imbalance between Kennedy and his assassin by always denying political coherence to Oswald. When the scales are righted, John F. Kennedy emerges as a martyr after all--a martyr to America's hubris, to its sense of omnipotence and immunity from consequences during what we know now was the height of the cold war.

The profound costs to the Soviet Union for waging the cold war are often commented upon, but equally penetrating assessments of the costs to the United States are hard to find. Once the assassination is understood as another defining event in that struggle it becomes clear the costs to America were not only economic. Along with events like Vietnam and Iran-contra, the assassination illustrates the dangers of a foreign policy driven by personal or ideological obsessions, and of policies made in extreme secrecy, with no oversight or accountability. Moreover, the pervasive and corrosive cynicism engendered by all three defining events is a bitter cost.

Whether at the mid-point of the cold war--and in retrospect, the most dangerous years--the Warren Commission could have revealed the entire truth is subject to conjecture. In all probability, some information would have remained classified. Still, it is tantalizing to think of the consequences of full disclosure in 1964 and not in terms of mere reputations and careers. If the American public had been shocked into recognizing the dangers of unmitigated anti-communism, what might the repercussions have been? Would conservatives have been chastened and liberals liberated from the fear of “losing” another country? A reductionist, Manichean debate might have been dramatically altered. Would Lyndon Johnson then have desisted from expanding the U.S. role in Vietnam? That is a real historical “what if” posed by the assassination, contrary to the fantasy that Kennedy was on the verge of pulling out from South Vietnam.

While the ifs are intriguing, the far more important task is to come to terms with the assassination. It would be one thing if conspiracy theories were still only believed by a decided minority of Americans. It’s quite another matter when more than 80 percent of Americans disbelieve or cannot accept their own history, and when the questions they ask about the past are based on palpable, cunningly manufactured falsehoods.

[1] Dulles, McCloy, Representative Hale Boggs, then-Representative Gerald Ford, and Senator Richard B. Russell knew in varying degrees about MONGOOSE, and Dulles in addition knew that assassination had been attempted. But the Commission staff was kept in the dark about CIA operations, and they researched and wrote the *Warren Report*. References to withholding information from the Commission should be understood as applying to the staff only.

[2] Because his veracity was not habitual, the Agency was not then able to establish whether or not Nosenko was a *bona fide* defector; the FBI believed he was. He was incarcerated for years until his *bona fides* were established beyond reasonable doubt. His description of the KGB’s attitude toward Oswald (“they didn’t want him from day one”) was confirmed in 1992 by *Izvestia*, which published a four-part series on Oswald based in part on his KGB dossier.

[3] The House report also alleged that a fourth shot was fired. The acoustic evidence for this allegation was subsequently discredited by experts and thus the scientific tests commissioned by the Select Committee corroborate the *Warren Report*.

[4] It cannot go unremarked that given the grand conspiracy Oliver Stone posits it’s touching to think that he nevertheless believes the government can now be trusted to release documents suggesting its complicity.

[5] The 2 percent also includes the autopsy photos; Secret Service methods; Oswald’s tax records; and some testimony containing slanderous but irrelevant information.

[6] Interviews with Warren Commission staff, and “Warren Commission Born Out of Fear: Washington Wanted to Stop Speculation,” *Washington Post*, 14 November 1993.