

What Oswald Wrought: Lament of a Generation

Oswald's Ghost

Directed and Written by Robert Stone

Produced by Robert Stone/AMERICAN EXPERIENCE/WGBH

in Association with the BBC

Documentary. 90 Minutes. 2007

American Assassin: Oswald Behind the Iron Curtain

Directed and Written by Robert Bayne

Produced by InSight Films/Minsk Channel 8

Documentary. 73 Minutes. 2006

By Max Holland



The 2007-08 season of AMERICAN EXPERIENCE opens with [Oswald's Ghost](#), a new documentary by filmmaker Robert Stone. It purports to chronicle “America’s forty-year obsession with the pivotal event of a generation,” the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on 22 November 1963.

Oswald's Ghost is not another “whodunit” film about the assassination. Rather, it is billed as close to a “definitive account” of what the assassination did to America. “This is a film,” in the words of writer/producer/director Robert Stone, “about how we absorbed and responded to the trauma and shock of being inexplicably—and repeatedly—robbed of our sense of idealism, optimism, and security.” Put more bluntly perhaps, *Oswald's Ghost* is the baby boomers’ penultimate take on the defining mystery (supposedly) of their lives.

There is a level on which *Oswald's Ghost* succeeds. Through the recollections of authors such as the late [Norman Mailer](#), Priscilla Johnson McMillan, and others, the documentary vividly recalls to mind the nation’s raw emotions. Mailer evokes the immediate aftermath, when he observes that “The real shock was philosophical, as if God had removed his sanction from America.” Political activists, ranging from Tom Hayden to Todd Gitlin to Gary Hart (which, come to think of it, is not a very broad range) summon the effect of the assassination and its aftermath on the baby boom generation in particular.

After Oswald’s death in police custody, “The impression [was that] somebody organized a conspiracy to wipe out Oswald,” observes Hayden, who would soon become a leader of the so-called “New Left.” And naturally, there is the obligatory bow to

Camelot. “The image of politicians up to that time was a kind of stereotypical back-room, arm-twisting, deal-making character,” notes [Gary Hart](#), with more than a hint of emotion. And then, “along came this very attractive, very articulate, 44-year-old . . . war hero . . . intelligent . . . read books . . . so he almost totally [and] single-handedly transformed the image of a politician.” So long as Kennedy was alive, Hayden chimes in, “We thought that we could change the world. This is the key thing that I think ended, for me certainly, with the murder of Kennedy.”

Once disbelief in the official story began to outpoll belief, roughly two years after the 1964 release of the [Warren Report](#), Mailer notes that the official conspiratorial theory became that “Kennedy was killed ‘cause he was getting ready to pull out of Vietnam, and that couldn’t be. . . . And like all of those theories it had [a] certain plausibility and a depressing lack of proof.” The 1968 assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy, of course, were the final blow. The latter’s quest for the presidency embodied the hope that Camelot might yet be restored, and that the American people would be redeemed for their sin of insufficiently appreciating JFK while he was alive. As Tom Hayden, puts it,

The impression [now] is that we’re facing power structures or conspiratorial cliques that apparently will stop at nothing. This became incorporated into a new understanding about how power works in America. . . . We’re not as democratic as we were taught. The model we’re operating on needs to incorporate random events, assassinations, stolen elections. We are not different from other countries.

That realization, in turn, led to the violent clash at the Democratic convention in Chicago, or as Todd Gitlin characterizes it, “the colossal confrontation between the forces of light and forces of darkness” that the Democrats have been trying to overcome ever since.

While Robert Stone takes the narrative all the way up to and past the 1991 blockbuster *JFK* by [Oliver Stone](#) (apparently no relation), the above is sufficient to convey the gist of what Robert Stone is trying to accomplish in *Oswald’s Ghost*. His aim is to present a meta-narrative about the event that cast a pall for decades over the American psyche and politics, and strains the fundamental bond of trust between the American people and their government to this day.



If the insights Stone presents sound familiar, though, it’s because they are. For a major, amply-funded, and polished documentary four years in the making, it’s oddly devoid of anything we haven’t heard before and long ago. And that points to the problem underlying Stone’s approach.

The documentary’s unarticulated premise is that one does not actually need to stake out a position about what exactly happened on November 22 (apart from agreeing that Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas) to present a history of what this watershed event did

to America afterwards. One can believe the Warren Commission got it essentially right, or one can believe the panel was plainly incompetent. One can believe the Commission was uninterested in getting at the truth, and chiefly an exercise in political pacification; or one can believe the Commission was congenitally corrupt, and a heinous accessory after the fact. Ostensibly, it doesn't matter what one believes because the history of the aftermath remains the same.

Such a notion is fashionable nonsense. Stone's premise is not a premise at all, but a contemporary conceit. The impact of the assassination cannot be discerned, much less presented, if one cannot tell the difference between the truth-seekers and the poseurs, the truth-tellers and the charlatans, or worse, if one knows the difference but shies away from conveying that distinction. The story of the aftermath depends wholeheartedly on a correct reading of the assassination, which happened only one way, after all, regardless of the number of possible scenarios.

Robert Stone would surely argue otherwise, and the most charitable interpretation of *Oswald's Ghost* is that Stone thinks viewers will be able to figure out, perhaps by osmosis, that conspiracy-mongering is a dead and politically-energating end. But what makes Stone's artifice indefensible, in the end, is the film's technique. The documentary is done in a pointillist style. Archival footage is interspersed with the recollections, opinions, and musings of 11 talking heads, most of whom had direct contact with the assassination and/or its aftermath.^[1] The bulk of the statements uttered are accurate, but a disturbing number are misrepresentations, half-truths, and outright falsehoods. One waits in vain for a narrator to guide one's way through this thicket, but a voice of omniscient reason never is heard. The net effect is to put prevaricators and dissemblers on the same plane as the truth-tellers, and accord the former a respectability and authority they do not deserve.



Josiah "Tink" Thompson, for example, who is prominently featured in *Oswald's Ghost*, was an assistant professor at Haverford College, specializing in the existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, before he decided, in the mid 1960s, to become a Dealey Plaza Irregular, a.k.a. conspiracy buff. His chosen area of specialization—every conspiracy buff marked off turf—was what happened in Dealey Plaza, a point of inquiry selected on the basis that it was the threshold question. As Thompson rightly observes in the documentary, "You can't answer any of the other questions like, who did it, or why did they do it, until you know what happened with some degree of precision."

Thompson's 1967 conclusion, published after careful study of the Zapruder film and the evidence assembled by the Warren Commission, was that four shots had been fired from three guns in the infamous (and bogus) duration of six seconds.^[2] Thompson's finding was risible, and no other person or panel of sound mind has ever concurred. Perhaps only a student of existential philosophy could have taken a mass of contradictory and complementary aural, visual, and forensic facts and produced an analysis that could not withstand five minutes' scrutiny.

Yet, in Robert Stone's telling, no one confronts or contradicts Thompson when he recites his discredited finding. If anything, the documentary lends credence to the absurd by suggesting that the Warren Commission's single-bullet conclusion was a concoction, rather than a rock-solid explanation derived after taking into account all the irrefutable forensic and ballistic facts. Not only is Thompson allowed to survive unscathed, he is mined for a Delphic pronouncement. "As long as a mystery resides at the center of this case, it can't be closed," Thompson intones at the outset of *Oswald's Ghost*.

While there certainly still are some minor mysteries about the assassination that strain explanation, there is nothing close to a mystery so central and of such moment that the case cannot be closed. There may never be a last word on the assassination, as *Oswald's Ghost* avers, but anyone who buys Thompson's sophistry is engaged in a willful act of denying the knowable.



Although the rehabilitation of Thompson is bad enough, Robert Stone also empowers [Mark Lane](#)—the walking embodiment of a shyster—to reincarnate himself again as the Émile Zola of the Kennedy assassination.^[3] When Lane refers to his December 1963 piece in the now-defunct *National Guardian*—an article that pointed out all the reasons why Oswald was allegedly innocent of the double murder on November 22 (he killed DPD Officer J.D. Tippit after fleeing Dealey Plaza)—there is no talking head to point out that Lane knew next to nothing about the case when he wrote that article, save what had appeared in the media. He hadn't visited Dallas, and he hadn't spoken to any witnesses or investigators. The *Guardian* article was "riddled with inaccuracies and unsupported suppositions," as Hugh Aynesworth has written.^[4]

And is it not of some significance that the KGB "correctly identified . . . Lane as the most talented of the first wave of conspiracy theorists?"^[5] Lane was so skilled, in fact, that he was deemed worthy of a subsidy, as his articles and lectures were very complementary to Soviet [propaganda and lies about the assassination](#).

These facts about Thompson and Lane point to the real complexity of what happened after the assassination, and what it did to America.^[6] But you will not find those answers in Robert Stone's "politically correct" treatment.

Stone's failure in this regard is all the more noticeable because AMERICAN EXPERIENCE—"television's longest-running, most-watched history series," according to PBS—seems unofficially to have adopted as its animating principle a sensible observation articulated by the late Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. "History is to the nation as memory is to the individual," Schlesinger once wrote. "As a person deprived of memory becomes disoriented and lost, not knowing where he has been or where he is going, so a nation denied a conception of its past will be disabled in dealing with its present and its future."^[7]

Putting aside the problematic fact that the historian who penned these words was himself a major dissembler of the assassination's historical context, Robert Stone's

approach does little to set right our conception of the recent past. If anything, *Oswald's Ghost* perpetuates and extends the confusion, notwithstanding that the documentary ends by showing the old buff Norman Mailer finally, albeit reluctantly, coming 'round to the official story. By then the damage has been done.



In 100 years, when the aftermath of the assassination genuinely is grist for historians, they will look back and recognize that while Lee Harvey Oswald gave the American people “something to think about,” in his inimitable fashion, he was instrumental in, but far from responsible for, all the subsequent damage that befell American society.^[8] As Priscilla Johnson McMillan, a member of *Washington DeCoded's* editorial board, wrote in a June 2007 [essay on Oswald](#), the larger portion of that responsibility lies with the conspiracy buffs.

[They] have gone to superhuman lengths to avoid facing the truth. They have constructed wildly-implausible scenarios, far-out, fictitious “conspirators,” and have scandalously maligned the motives of Kennedy’s successor, rather than take a hard look at the man who actually did it. They have, ironically, done more to poison American political life than Lee Oswald—with the most terrible of intentions—was able to do.

To be sure, this isn’t the first time persons without scruples have sought to exploit, for political, personal, or financial gain, a terrible event in US history. The conspiracy-mongering in the wake of the Kennedy assassination had its antecedent in the wave of books and articles that followed the assassination of Abraham Lincoln nearly a century earlier. But it is instructive to recall that whereas it took 75 years before a writer dared accuse the federal government of complicity in Lincoln’s murder, it took less than four years before a mendacious district attorney from New Orleans essentially [charged the CIA](#) with having its finger on the trigger that killed Kennedy.^[9]

It is somewhat ironic, then, that the only notorious conspiracy buff who comes off badly in *Oswald's Ghost* is this very same district attorney, [Jim Garrison](#). Perhaps it was because he was not around to explain himself anymore, having died in 1992. In point of fact, however, Mark Lane, Josiah Thompson, and [Edward J. Epstein](#) (the latter being the cleverest, and most pernicious, of the bunch) deserve to be lumped and exposed together with Garrison, although Stone does not see it that way.

It is odd and certainly unintentional, but *Oswald's Ghost* represents a kind of book-end to that other notable film treatment of the assassination by the more famous Stone named Oliver. Both films purport to be about one thing, but in actuality, are about another.

Oliver Stone’s 1991 film, [JFK](#), claimed that the Warren Commission’s version of events was a myth, and that the movie represented “the inner spiritual meaning of the assassination.”^[10] In truth, *JFK* was genuinely about the temporary bout of insanity that gripped New Orleans and much of America in 1967, instigated by an audacious demagogue, Garrison, who unfortunately held a position of state power.

Similarly, Robert Stone's film claims to be about what the assassination did to the nation, but in time it will come to be seen for what it is: the latest example of a cosseted, self-absorbed generation's inability to come to grips with the occasional and chance cruelties of real life.

Editor's Note: *Oswald's Ghost* is having a special public screening on November 19 at the Texas Theater in Oak Cliff, the Dallas neighborhood where Oswald was apprehended just after murdering police officer J.D. Tippit in cold blood. Subsequently, the documentary will be released in a limited number of movie theaters nationwide, prior to being aired on PBS's AMERICAN EXPERIENCE on 14 January 2008.

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Another documentary involving Oswald and his deed, but one that has not found a US distributor, is *American Assassin*, a joint production of Denver filmmaker Robert Bayne and Minsk Channel 8 in Belarus, the only independent broadcast TV station in that former Soviet republic. Three years in the making, the 2006 documentary is the first to delve deeply into the 2½ years Oswald spent in Minsk, Byelorussia, at the height of the Cold War. He was not yet 20 years old when he defected to the Soviet Union in September 1959, and not quite 23 when he returned to the United States, bitterly disappointed in Moscow's applied Communism.

Bayne's documentary is roughly the film equivalent of Norman Mailer's 1995 book, *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*. As did Mailer, the documentary views the assassination primarily through the lens of Oswald's sojourn in Minsk. Both emphasize and draw from, with good effect, the local KGB surveillance files on Oswald, which were exhaustive. (The publicity material accompanying the documentary states that at one point the filmmakers were threatened by the Belarusian KGB, but gives no specifics). Both interviewed Belarusians who came into contact with Oswald. In Bayne's case, he managed a rare interview with Erich Titovyets, a medical student at the time, who became, by all accounts, Oswald's closest friend and associate in Minsk. Bayne also managed to snag Oswald's assigned Russian-language tutor, Stanislav Shushkevich, who just happened to become the first president of an independent Belarus (the former Byelorussia) when the Communist imperium of 15 republics fractured in 1991.

Although it's clear the production was done on a shoe-string budget, the production values are solid if not of the highest caliber. Archival film from the late 1950s, including rare footage from the radio/TV factory where Oswald "worked" (he was a slacker) effectively transports the viewer back in time and place. The outline of the story of how Oswald navigated between the superpowers is familiar enough by now, if still somewhat

incredible. A 19-year-old ex-Marine, self-taught in pidgin Russian, Oswald traveled to Moscow on a tourist visa in October 1959 and declared his allegiance to the Soviet state. Low-ranking officials took him for an intelligence operative (by 1959, Americans had long ceased coming to live in the socialist paradise) and turned him away. Oswald responded by slashing his wrist, which was enough to get the decision reversed.

Oswald was then sent into internal exile to Minsk, where there were no foreign journalists, and was placed under continuous surveillance, assigned a menial job but relatively high income, and given a sought-after apartment in the center of town (all the better for surveillance purposes). After a love affair that ended badly, and as the dreariness and regimentation of Soviet life set in once he ceased to be the center of attention, Oswald retrieved his discarded US passport and returned to America in June 1962, with a wife he married on the rebound. If he was going to be reduced to singing Tennessee Ernie Ford's "Sixteen Tons" at vodka-filled parties that were the only respite from the endless winters in Minsk, it made more sense to go back in the United States.

It has always been something of a puzzle why the Soviets let Oswald go back, much less take a trained Soviet citizen with him (his wife, Marina, was a pharmacist). Other Americans who defected and subsequently expressed similar desires were sent to rot in the far reaches of the Soviet Union, or, at best, live out their lives in desperation in Moscow. Bayne's documentary, however, supplies a vivid and rational answer: Oswald was a terrific, unwanted burden to the Soviet state. Although he was exactly what he appeared to be, the KGB remained unwilling to lift its intense surveillance of the strange young American, a task that absorbed enormous amounts of manpower and resources even though Oswald's daily life was circumscribed by the KGB's pre-planned but largely invisible borders.

The documentary convincingly asserts that the Oswald file represented one of the most extensive in-country surveillances of one man ever conducted during the Soviet era. When he proved an indifferent, even hostile, worker, which rendered him useless for propaganda purposes, and after Oswald consistently refused the lures placed in front of him—for a time, he worked adjacent to the experimental section of the radio-TV factory, to see if he exhibited an inordinate interest in new technology—the Soviets grabbed at the chance to be rid of the nettlesome foreigner. "We don't want him . . . let the Americans have him," was the evaluation, and so the KGB permitted his letters to reach the US embassy in Moscow, and eventually Oswald got his passport back. The documentary gives this notion more sense than ever before.

From among all the Belarusians interviewed for the documentary, the most insight into Oswald's personality comes from Dr. Erich Titovyets, who had never been willing to be interviewed for a Western production before, and who even eluded Mailer while he was conducting extensive interviews in Minsk for his 1995 book. Unlike many of Oswald's "friends," who actually befriended him for the purpose of informing on him to the local KGB, Titovyets seems to have been genuine. He sought Oswald out, though he was reluctant to impose, because he wanted to improve his English-language skills by conversing with a native speaker. Titovyets initially thought Oswald was an intellectual

and cultured, but soon learned otherwise. The American was a very simple-minded young man, and poorly educated. Yet they remained friends, if only because Oswald was such a novelty who gave no indication of being around for a long time. “When you entered Oswald’s apartment, the impression was that Oswald was sitting on his suitcase,” Titovyets recalled. What he mainly learned from the young American was how to cuss in English, and play poker.

One can think of several characters who are conspicuously missing from the documentary. Robert Oswald, who tried to reason with his erratic younger brother when he renounced his American citizenship, is not interviewed, nor is Priscilla Johnson McMillan, one of two journalists to question Oswald in Moscow when he was still brimming with hope about his new life as a socialist man. For that matter, Richard Snyder, the US embassy officer who dealt most directly with Oswald both in 1959 and 1961-62, might have shed some fascinating light on their interactions. Then, of course, there is also Marina Oswald, née Prusakova. Budget constraints probably prevented the producers rounding out the documentary with such interviews. Marina Oswald reportedly demands tens of thousands of dollars before she will consent to be filmed answering questions.

The primary problem with *American Assassin*, however, is not so much who is missing but the misguided effort to draw a straight line from Minsk to Dallas. While Oswald’s excursion to the Soviet Union, and experience with socialism as it really existed, was formative, it was not determinative. The coda in the documentary tries to make that case, and in the process glosses over much that was eventful in Oswald’s life between June 1962 and November 1963—not least of all, his attempt on the life of former Army Major General Edwin A. Walker. A notorious right-winger, Walker criticized the Kennedy administration for, among other things, spreading the “big L-I-E that to do anything regarding Cuba would bring on an atomic war.”^[11] Assassinating Walker was the reason why Oswald purchased his Mannlicher-Carcano in March and used it for the first time in April. To argue, in effect, that politics no longer animated Oswald after his experience with really-existing socialism does not square with the facts of his life after he returned to the United States, and with his new infatuation over the Communist revolution taking place in Cuba.

As with Mailer’s book, *American Assassin* would have been better conceived as *Oswald in Minsk*. To shed as much light as possible on his life in that long-suffering, ancient city more than justifies a documentary. Trying to stretch that chapter to encompass what Oswald did on November 22 only diminishes what the producers were trying to accomplish.

Editor’s Note: *American Assassin* can be purchased as a DVD by clicking [here](#).

[1] The participants are Hugh Aynesworth, a *Dallas Morning News* reporter in 1963; historian Robert Dallek, the author of biographies of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson; Edward J. Epstein, who wrote three books on the subject, including *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth* in 1966; Professor Todd Gitlin, a historian of the New Left; former Senator Gary Hart (D-Colorado); Tom Hayden; Mark Lane, author of several books about the assassination, including *Rush to Judgment* in 1966; Norman Mailer, author of the 1995 book, *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*; Priscilla Johnson McMillan, author of the 1977 book *Marina and Lee*, a biography of the Oswalds; Dan Rather, a reporter with the CBS television network in 1963; Josiah Thompson, author of the 1967 book, *Six Seconds in Dallas: A Micro-Study of the Kennedy Assassination*. Aynesworth, McMillan, and Rather are the only participants with first-hand exposure to the case, and long-enunciated, non-conspiratorial views of the assassination.

[2] Josiah Thompson, *Six Seconds in Dallas* (New York: Bernard Geis, 1967), 195.

[3] Steven Brill, "The Case Against Mark Lane," *Esquire*, 13 February 1979. Brill concluded that Lane, who he described as "loud, venal, and truthless," was constantly driven by only two motives: profit and headlines.

[4] Hugh Aynesworth with Stephen G. Michaud, *JFK: Breaking the News* (Richardson, TX: International Focus Press, 2003), 223.

[5] Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 227-228.

[6] For a recent work that address some of the issues Stone ignores, see James Piereson, *Camelot and the Cultural Revolution: How the Assassination of John F. Kennedy Shattered American Liberalism* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007).

[7] Schlesinger, "[History and National Stupidity](#)," *New York Review of Books*, 27 April 2006.

[8] Oswald spoke these words to Priscilla Johnson McMillan in Moscow on 16 November 1959.

[9] Otto Eisenschiml, a chemist-turned historian, claimed in a 1937 best-selling book, *Why Was Lincoln Murdered?*, that Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton organized the conspiracy to assassinate Lincoln. William Hanchett, *The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 163-184.

[10] Robert Brent Toplin, ed., *Oliver Stone's USA: Film, History, and Controversy* (Lawrence, KN: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 298.

[11] AP, "Walker Says 'US or UN' To Be Main Issue in 1964," *Dallas Morning News*, 15 June 1963.