

Paranoia Unbound

Deep Politics and the Death of JFK

By Peter Dale Scott

University of California Press. 413 pp. \$25

*Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald
and the Assassination of JFK*

By Gerald Posner

Random House. 607 pp. \$25

*Who Shot JFK?: A Guide
to the Major Conspiracy Theories*

By Bob Callahan

Fireside. 159 pp. \$12

By Max Holland

It is instructive to contrast the mythology surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy with the public and scholarly attitudes toward Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor – the other “flashbulb” event that seared America's collective memory. Like the assassination of Kennedy, the surprise attack was the subject of an executive branch investigation followed by congressional hearings. As with the assassination, explanations based on conspiracy have dogged the official story about Pearl Harbor. (The latest accusation surfaced only three years ago.)

But distortions of the record and questionable logic have always helped relegate Pearl Harbor conspiracy theories to the political fringes; the official story remains intact. The phenomena surrounding the JFK assassination could not present a starker contrast. There the passage of time has only heightened public disbelief in the official account of the assassination, commonly known as the *Warren Report*. After the Warren Commission published its findings in September 1964, a Gallup poll indicated that 56 percent of Americans believed the report's main finding: that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, was President Kennedy's assassin. Today, however, approximately 90 percent of the public believes there was some kind of conspiracy to kill JFK.

This figure includes some who toil in the halls of academe. Among the plethora of new offerings on the 30th anniversary of the assassination is *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK*, by Peter Dale Scott, an English professor at the University of California at Berkeley. In one sense, there is nothing remarkable about this work. Indeed, its outstanding characteristics put it squarely in the tradition of most books about the assassination. *Deep Politics* is an unreadable compendium of “may haves” and “might

haves,” non-sequiturs, and McCarthy-style innuendo, with enough documentation to satisfy any paranoid. The assassination, Scott writes (in typically opaque prose), was “the product of ongoing relationships and processes within the deep American political process.” What is this deep process? A virtual political Disneyland: the CIA, drug dealers, Somoza, Fred Hampton, COINTELPRO, Oliver North. And that’s just from two pages.

The manuscript apparently went unpublished for years, and one is mightily tempted to say that it should have remained so. Astoundingly, though, the book won the majority approval of the 20 professors, including four historians, who served on the University of California’s editorial committee in 1991-92.

To understand the JFK phenomenon, it helps to revisit the classic lecture “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” delivered at Oxford 30 years ago by Columbia University historian Richard Hofstadter (and published in a book of essays by the same title in 1965). The most prominent qualities of the paranoid style, according to Hofstadter, are “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy.” Propagators don’t see conspiracies or plots here and there in history; they regard “a ‘vast’ or ‘gigantic’ conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events.”

To be sure, as Hofstadter noted, the paranoid style isn’t unique to America. Witness Germany under Hitler or the Soviet Union under Stalin, where it actually came to power. But it is an old and recurring mode of expression in American public life, as evinced by the anti-Masonic movement in the 1820s, the anti-Catholicism of the 1850s, Populists’ claims about an international banking conspiracy in the 1900s, and Senator Joe McCarthy’s “immense conspiracy” of the 1950s. Purveyors often feel threatened by sweeping change, whether it be waves of new immigrants or a revolution in the economic order. At other times, they articulate an acute sense of dispossession, such as that felt by the far Right from the 1930s into the early 1950s.

Although the Kennedy conspiracy choir has some voices on the Right, the great preponderance of books (450 since 1963) and articles (tens of thousands) have been written from the liberal/left perspective. Factual disputes have much less to do with this than one might think. “Catastrophe . . . is more likely to elicit the syndrome of paranoid rhetoric,” Hofstadter wrote. And putting aside venal reasons, clearly the liberal/left outpouring is related to its sense of political dispossession since 1963. (Democrats were out of power for 20 of the next 30 years.) Indeed, every wrong in America is considered traceable to the presidency that was aborted and the future that died on November 22, 1963.

Still, what is markedly different about this phenomenon from previous manifestations of paranoia is that the distrust is so deep and pervasive. Glancing through *Who Shot JFK?* one can find a conspiracy theory for practically every contingency and political belief: The Mafia did it; Robert Kennedy did; Jackie was upset because her husband had extramarital affairs, so she did it. The KGB, Cubans (both anti- and pro-Castro), the CIA and/or FBI, right-wing Texas oilmen, tsarist Russians, rocket scientist Wernher von

Braun – and on the zany list goes. The “friendly fire” theory holds that a Secret Service agent riding in the limousine behind JFK fired the fatal shots, by accident. And apparently the latest trend among conspiracy theorists is to bash one another for believing in the wrong conspiracy.

Commentators usually ascribe the public’s paranoia to the disturbing events that followed Kennedy’s murder: Vietnam, other assassinations, Watergate, exposure of FBI and CIA abuses in the 1970s, and finally the Iran-contra scandal, all of which undermined Americans’ trust in their elected government. But a more complicated argument can be made. The assassination and its aftermath have never been firmly integrated into their place and time, largely because of Cold War exigencies. Consequently, Americans have neither fully understood nor come to grips with the past.

But the assassination is very much a part of the Cold War, an unintended consequence of U.S. Policies. And once bolted down, it ceases to be unfathomable and becomes another defining post-World War II event, as much as Vietnam or the Cuban missile crisis.

In a letter to *The New York Times* last year, William Manchester, author of *The Death of a President*, identified the key source of the public’s incomprehension:

To employ what may seem an odd metaphor, there is an aesthetic principle here. If you put six million dead Jews on one side of a scale and one of 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.

Actually, though, Oswald carries more weight than Americans have dared admit to themselves. As the *Warren Report* showed and Gerald Posner, a former Wall Street lawyer, reiterates in *Case Closed*, Oswald was a highly politicized Marxist sociopath. Disappointed with Soviet-style communism, he returned to the United States in June 1962 and began to see Cuba as the purest embodiment of communist ideology, the only truly revolutionary state. In New Orleans, he started his own “Fair Play for Cuba” chapter and walked the streets with a “Viva Fidel” placard.

Oswald, who fervently read left-wing periodicals and monitored Radio Havana, was acutely aware of the depth and nature of U.S. hostility toward Cuba. In all likelihood, he believed the worst rumors of U.S. attempts to overthrow – even assassinate – Castro,

information that was later kept from the Warren Commission. After leaving New Orleans, Oswald tried to obtain a visa to Cuba to enlist in the country's defense. But the Cuban embassy failed to see him as a "friend of Cuba," and he returned to Dallas, embittered.

A month later, Kennedy came to town. The opportunity to subject Kennedy to the same dangers plaguing Castro presented itself. As Posner writes, Oswald, who had failed at almost everything he tried, "was suddenly faced with the possibility of having a much greater impact on history." Jack Ruby was equally emotional, violent, and opportunistic, though not political.

Because of the Cold War, the CIA and FBI did not inform the Warren Commission about the covert operations to remove Castro. Such information, the agencies reasoned, would not contradict the central conclusion and therefore could be, and was, kept secret. Consequently, the *Warren Report* depicted Oswald as acting upon inchoate feelings (compounded by marital troubles) but without acute political motives.

Twelve years later, however, Senator Frank Church's select committee on intelligence revealed the extent of anti-Castro plotting and the fact that the CIA and FBI had lied by omission to another arm of government. This shattered whatever trust remained in the official story and ripped the lid off a Pandora's box of conspiracy theories. A slightly amended version of the official story should have become the new dogma by the late 1970s: The Kennedys' fixation with Castro had inadvertently motivated a political sociopath. Instead, the disturbing truths were again obfuscated by Cold War exigencies, and by Kennedy partisans, who tried to disavow JFK and RFK's knowledge of the plots.

The 30th anniversary of the assassination, especially since it coincided with the end of the Cold War, should have been marked by attempts to integrate the assassination into history. Of all the offerings, Posner's *Case Closed* would seem the most suitable. But though Posner exhaustively debunks every canard proposed to date about the assassination, he largely ignored the contextual history of Oswald's act and provides little more insight than the Warren Commission did as to why Kennedy became Oswald's target. In addition, Posner's stamina fails him when he writes about events after 1964, and the aftermath is almost as important in understanding the assassination as the act itself. (In his new biography, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*, Richard Reeves doesn't shrink from depicting Kennedy as a Cold Warrior, intent on overthrowing Castro. Yet he fails to draw any connections to the assassination; indeed, Oswald is not even mentioned in the book.)

So long as it lacks historical coherence, the official story will probably never be believed, and Americans will continue to ask questions based on cunningly manufactured falsehoods. To be sure, every nation is sustained by its own myths, which occasionally collide with reality. But when myths are as divorced from reality as these are, they become dangerous. Americans are encouraged to feel nostalgia for a past that ever was, wax dreamily about what might have been, or indulge in elaborate paranoid fantasies

Washington Decoded

about their own government. Such states of mind hardly conduce to a rational consideration of America's role in a new world.