

## Three Decades of Doubt About the JFK Assassination Will Now Get Three Years of Scrutiny

It is easier to perceive error than to find truth, for the former lies on the surface and is easily seen, while the latter lies in the depth, where few are willing to search for it.

Johann von Goethe

*By Max Holland*

For three days last month about 250 conspiracy buffs met in Washington to observe the 30th anniversary of their reverse Bible – the Warren Commission Report on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Speakers at the meeting referred to what they believe is the non-defining, if not deliberately misleading, document on that tragedy as “The Warren Omission.”

The “Three Decades of Doubt” conference convened by the Coalition on Presidential Assassinations, or COPA, a recent alliance of several smaller groups, brought together a virtual *Who’s Who* of the “JFK research community,” as they prefer to call themselves.

It included such students of alleged conspiracies as Gary Aguilar, a practicing ophthalmologist who takes exception to the official interpretation of the JFK autopsy; James DiEugenio, a writer billed as the “reigning authority on the New Orleans aspects of the case”; Robert Groden, a consultant to [Oliver Stone](#) and author of a book of photographs that allegedly expose the cover-up; [Mark Lane](#), a Washington lawyer who pioneered conspiratorialism; Jim Marrs, an author and Stone consultant who has recently become intrigued with the possible multiple identities of Lee Harvey Oswald; John Newman, a retired Army major who advances the thesis that JFK was murdered, in part, because he wanted to end the Vietnam war and abandon South Vietnam; David Scheim, a mathematician at the National Institutes of Health who believes the Mafia did it; and [Peter Dale Scott](#), an English professor at Berkeley who argues, in *Deep Politics*, that the assassination was “the product of ongoing relationships and processes within the deep American political process.”

What is this deep process? It is a political wonderland linking the CIA, the FBI, drug dealers, Anastasio Somoza and Oliver North, among others – as Scott details in just two pages of his book.

Ordinary citizens came to the conference, too, paying a convention registration fee of \$150. But the meeting was far from a gathering of the conspiracy-consumed John and Jane Does. Many fervent conspiracists are highly educated people – physicians,

diplomats, lawyers, and PhD's. Given the variety of their views, it was striking to observe their comity and the courtesies they extended to each other. In some haughtier academic settings, scholars who present such wildly incompatible views often go for each other's throats, flinging aspersions and ridicule. Here there was respect and democracy with a small "d." All conspiracy buffs were given equal time.

The real heretics are always elsewhere. They are everyone who does not believe in an assassination conspiracy theory. To fully appreciate this phenomenon it helps to recall a classic lecture given by Columbia University historian Richard Hofstadter in 1963. The earmarks of "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," Hofstadter said then, were "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy."

While the paranoid style is not exclusively an American phenomenon, it is an old and recurring reaction here to sweeping social change, economic disorder and national traumas. It surfaced in the anti-Masonic movement of the 1820s, in the anti-Catholicism of the 1850s, among some Populists at the turn of the century, with Father Coughlin during the Great Depression and more recently in Senator Joseph McCarthy's "immense conspiracy" of the 1950s. The conference in Washington confirmed that while the Kennedy conspiracy choir has a few members on the far right, the majority hold liberal or leftist political views. Several spoke of "an enslaved nation" that has "lost control of its government" and "lost its nationhood."

### Dashed Dreams

In the aftermath of Kennedy's death, the advocacy of conspiracy across the liberal political spectrum may be traceable to immediate post-assassination myths. Even though President Kennedy was cautious domestically and, in foreign policy, was a militant cold-warrior, the myth of Camelot made him in death a martyr of liberal causes at home and abroad. A sense of political dispossession still drives many liberal conspiracy buffs. For them, it is as if every wrong in America for three decades is attributable to a future that died in Dallas on November 22, 1963.

The COPA conference had its share of the absurd. During an hourlong "breakout" panel entitled "Whodunit?" an unsuspecting hotel guest who detoured into the meeting room might have thought it was a rehearsal for a *Saturday Night Live* skit about Sotheby's auction house. Conspiracy buffs were outbidding each other.

"Whodunit?" the chairman asked, and his audience responded energetically with more and more dazzlingly competing suspects: the Federal Reserve banks and Wall Street because an independently wealthy Jack Kennedy was challenging the capitalist system; the Israelis (no reason given); the local police because Dallas was a font of right-wing hatred; H.L. Hunt, the right-wing Texas oil millionaire; the KGB; pro-Castro Cubans; anti-Castro Cubans; and/or the US Joint Chiefs of Staff. There was a conspiracy for every contingency.

To judge from the steadfast attendance at the larger plenary sessions of this non-stop,

three-day conference, the conspiracy movement has never been stronger. For two days running, in the huge, top-of-the-line Washington Sheraton Hotel, the sessions went from 8:30 AM to 10 PM. Books, newsletters, organizational advertisements and JFK paraphernalia were widely on sale.

And to the great satisfaction of the conspiracy buffs, public opinion polls seem to confirm their growing strength and ardor. Speakers repeatedly cited polls asserting that “90 percent of the public” believes that there was some kind of conspiracy to kill JFK and that its lurking mystery saps American confidence. One of the most popular handouts at the conference was a page copied from Kevin Phillips’s new book, *Arrogant Capital*, with a graph showing Americans’ trust in Washington starting a headlong plunge in 1964.

### Getting Recognition

As recently as 1991 the movement to prove a conspiracy was getting nowhere. Rebuffed in their efforts to gain access to classified government files, conspiracy theorists were endlessly analyzing the same old information. Then, while motion picture director Oliver Stone was filming the movie *JFK*, a conspiracy buff wrote Stone a letter reminding him that the records of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which in 1979 re-investigated both the assassination and the Warren Commission’s work on it, were sealed until 2029.

According to Jim Lesar, head of a group called the [Assassination Archives Research Center](#), that information prompted Stone to insert a tag line at the end of his film demanding that all government files be opened. A blizzard of letters from moviegoers fell on Washington, and in 1992 Congress passed an extraordinary statute in hopes of alleviating public suspicion about the federal government’s response to the Kennedy assassination.

The law instructed the National Archives to gather all assassination-related records into a single massive collection, open to the public with the latest high-tech retrieval aids. It established guidelines for the release of federal records that are among the most liberal in existence today. Thanks to Hollywood, conspiracy buffs now stand on the verge of their biggest archival bonanza, and the assassination research community is re-energized.

A high point of the COPA conference came on its last day when two officials from the [JFK Assassination Records Review Board](#) (ARRB), the panel newly commissioned by Congress to oversee and compel the release of assassination records, addressed the audience. John Tunheim, the ARRB chairman, stressed the board’s independence from intragovernment interference. Tunheim and David Marwell, an experienced archivist who is the board’s executive director, answered questions for another half hour. The legislation creating the ARRB guarantees it a life span of only two years, but if need be, the board itself can extend its existence for another year, to October 1997. Tunheim said it probably will do that. The board’s presumption will always be in favor of immediate disclosure, Tunheim also said.

The COPA conference was almost totally ignored by the press. But the presence of the two ARRB officials was proof that the assassination research community is finally being taken seriously. The gathering ended with a three-hour open hearing during which the full board took formal and stenographically recorded testimony from all who asked to appear. (The board announced its second formal hearing, scheduled for November 18 in Dallas at the Earle Cabell Federal Building.)

It is easy to foresee future controversy, though. Several critics cited the disclosure law's exemption of the JFK autopsy records from forced public release. At the Kennedy family's insistence, the ARRB is not empowered by law to require the release of them. Suspicions may persist. And one witness warned the board to watch out for self-servingly forged government documents – newly released as genuine antiques. Because the board's mandate expires in 1997, questioners also asked how the panel could pry loose documents proving CIA or FBI complicity when “all the agencies need to do is stonewall for another three years.”

It is easy to make fun of the conspiracy buffs. But they are responsible for legislation that is on the verge of accomplishing something important. The truth that will eventually emerge from the secret records is that the assassination and its subsequent investigations are misunderstood because they have been persistently divorced from their context. Once history is restored to the terrible events that began on November 22, 1963, they will cease to seem an unfathomably continuing conspiratorial evil. They will be seen instead as another bitter consequence of the Cold War.

### The Cold War Chill

Although nearly every researcher looking at newly released documents will be trying to find new clues to an ostensible cover-up by the FBI, the CIA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Warren Commission or all of them, the genuine story waiting to be discerned is that [Cold War considerations](#) drove and sometimes bent the first and subsequent investigations of the JFK assassination.

These investigations pitted the government against itself. They cut across the entire national security apparatus. In the clashes that ensued between the Warren Commission, for example, and Cold War establishments like the CIA, the latter agencies always won. Cold War dictates overrode the official search for answers because the national trauma of the assassination could not be allowed to add new tensions to the 45-year East-West struggle or disclose covert activities against the Communist bloc. For example, the CIA argued that if specific evidence of no Soviet involvement in the Kennedy assassination – which was quickly available – were to be made public, it would compromise intelligence sources and methods.

So Cold War secrets were kept. They could be kept because they did not change the essential finding that Oswald did it, and he did it alone.

If public doubts about the assassination and its aftermath now begin to subside, and if suspicions about the motives of a heinous government cover-up are reduced, perhaps we can finally hold the only debate about the assassination worth having. It is the one that has always been lacking. It is about full disclosure in a democratic society.

In the 1960s, the CIA was obligated to tell the Warren Commission – not to mention the American people – about its clandestine efforts to overthrow Fidel Castro, including its proposed assassination plots. That was one big secret held back in 1964. If the word “conspiracy” must be uttered in the same breath with the Kennedy assassination, then the conspiracy that existed then was a conspiracy of silence designed to keep secret the US government’s covert actions against Castro.

The CIA had every reason to be concerned about a no-holds-barred investigation of the events of November 22 that went beyond a criminal inquiry. The exposure of its anti-Castro operations would have had predictable consequences, including a propaganda windfall for the Communist bloc that would have lasted for years and strong condemnations by the international community, plus an intense investigation of the CIA and officials of two administrations who had directed the anti-Castro efforts.

It was surely not President Lyndon Johnson’s intention to exacerbate Cold War intrigues when he announced the Warren Commission’s formation. Indeed, his intention was the opposite: to cool fervently anti-Soviet rhetoric in Congress that might heighten East-West fears of nuclear attack.

Even if there was a risk that condemnation of the Warren Commission’s report would follow if the information being withheld leaked out, there was deemed to be no contest between damaging the commission’s reputation by limiting its scope and raising Cold War risks by allowing full disclosure.

Former President Gerald Ford, a member of the Warren Commission, explained in a recent interview that government officials believed that Cold War exigencies gave them the right to withhold the truth, in whole or part, to protect national security. No complete federal investigation of the Kennedy assassination could be conducted publicly in the political pressure vessel of the Cold War. It is naïve to believe otherwise. Yet Americans believe that secrecy *per se* poisons official verdicts.

Ultimately, whether or not the rationing of the truth to protect “national security” was an all too common and outrageous act during the 45-year-long Cold War struggle depends on one’s perspective. There is no doubt that it was done. Some secrets *were* shared with the commission but not made public. No doubt referring to US communications intercepts, Chief Justice Earl Warren told the press shortly after publication of the report bearing his name that there were “things that will not be revealed in our lifetime.”

As former President Ford now acknowledges, “[T]oday, with the totally different atmosphere, those judgments might seem improper . . . [But] it was inappropriate in the

atmosphere of [1964] to divulge” certain information.

It is now argued passionately that this holding back of some truths was one of the greatest misjudgments in American history because the enduring controversies about the assassination have helped foster deep alienation and a loss of respect among the American people for their government. When all, or most, of the secrets become known, that cynicism, ironically, may be the most lasting wound inflicted by Lee Harvey Oswald.