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A Universe of Conspirators

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matched a revolver that Oswald was carrying when he was arrested.

If Oswald shot Kennedy, his motives remain obscure. One possibility is that, as a supporter of Fidel Castro's Cuban revolution, Oswald (unlike the vast majority of Americans at the time) was aware of U.S. government plots against Castro's life. Also, Oswald seemed to believe he deserved to be an historically relevant person, despite having failed in numerous schemes to achieve importance. Perhaps shooting Kennedy was his last, desperate (and successful) attempt at significance.

Oswald denied his guilt. He was silenced forever on Sunday, Nov. 24, by Dallas strip club owner Jack Ruby, who snuck into the basement of the Dallas

police headquarters as Oswald was being transferred and fatally shot him.

In the days following Oswald's death, President Lyndon Johnson set up a blue-ribbon commission to investigate the assassination and to quell rumors of conspiracy. Eventually, this became known as the Warren Commission, after its head, Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren. After several months of frantic work, the commission announced its conclusion: Oswald had shot Kennedy, and there was no evidence of any conspiracy.

Rather than putting the issue to rest, the Warren Commission's report kickstarted five decades of doubt and distrust and an ever-proliferating array of conspiracy theories.

A universe of conspirators

by John McAdams

Within two hours of the assassination of John F. Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald became the prime suspect. Evidence quickly accumulated that Oswald, a self-proclaimed Marxist, was guilty of killing the president. The Warren Commission report, issued in September of the following year, endorsed this conclusion.

Conspiracy theories sprouted in great number almost from day one. Oswald's travels and murky background, Jack Ruby's murder of Oswald, Ruby's own unclear past, and conflicting witness accounts all contributed. As historian William Manchester noted, "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. ... A conspiracy would, of course, do the job nicely."

Conspiracy theories come in all flavors — some close to bizarre and some that raise serious questions. Some conspiracists, for example, view Oswald as a zombie assassin, a *Manchurian Candidate*-type of killer programmed by conspirators with drugs and hypnosis to murder Kennedy. Much more mainstream is the theory that a shooter from Kennedy's right front (the famous grassy knoll) shot at the president. Because multiple witnesses saw a shooter behind Kennedy in the Texas School Book Depository, this would imply two shooters and a conspiracy.

Various groups have been fingered as conspirators; and conspiracies require that groups are working in tandem with one another. Generally, the conspirators are chosen from among the following entities.

The CIA

If any organization would have the ability to mount the elaborate covert operation necessary to kill



TIMELINE OF JFK'S ASSASSINATION

Nov. 22, 1963

7:10 a.m.

Lee Harvey Oswald knocks on the front door of co-worker Wesley Frazier, with whom he sometimes rides to work. Oswald tells Frazier that the package in the backseat contains curtain rods.

7:30 a.m.

President Kennedy begins his day in Fort Worth with a breakfast of soft-boiled eggs, bacon, toast with marmalade, orange juice and coffee. Aide Evelyn Lincoln recalled, "He was in a very happy mood."

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Kennedy, frame Oswald and then cover its tracks, it should be the Central Intelligence Agency. Of course, the CIA's inept and often downright comical attempts to depose or assassinate Fidel Castro suggest we ought not blandly assume it could pull off such an enterprise.

It is true that Kennedy was irate about the bad intelligence from the CIA that led him to proceed with the Bay of Pigs invasion, and he vowed "to splinter the CIA into a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds." Conspiracy authors correctly note this quotation but ignore the fact that the Bay of Pigs invasion was in April 1961, 31 months before the assassination. If Kennedy was going to move decisively against the CIA, he would have done so much earlier. In fact, mainstream histories show Kennedy to have been greatly enamored of the CIA's covert

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8:45 a.m.

Kennedy gives a brief speech to about 5,000 people, then attends a Chamber of Commerce breakfast.

10:14 a.m.

The Kennedys return to their suite. The president calls former Vice President John Nance Garner and congratulates him on his 95th birthday. An aide shows Kennedy a full-page ad in a Dallas newspaper that is critical of his presidency.

Kennedy departs Fort Worth aboard Air Force One. Vice President Lyndon Johnson follows aboard Air Force Two.

11:20 a.m.

11:37 a.m.

Air Force One lands at Love Field in Dallas. The Kennedys and the Johnsons head for the Dallas Trade Mart, where Kennedy will speak at a luncheon.

11:50 a.m.

Kennedy makes the motorcade pause when he sees a girl with a sign that reads, "Mr. President, will you please stop and shake hands with me?" The president is deluged with supporters when he steps out of the car.

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operations, many of which he approved in the years following the Bay of Pigs.

Oswald's foreign travels — he defected to the Soviet Union in 1959, returned to the United States in 1962, and traveled to Mexico City in 1963 in an attempt to get into communist Cuba — certainly put him on the CIA's radar. Conspiracists have claimed Oswald was a false defector when he went to Russia, but there is no evidence of that. They find it suspicious that the CIA claimed not to have debriefed him on his return to the United States from the USSR. Oswald's trip to Mexico City raised a variety of issues. CIA monitoring followed Oswald as he visited the Cuban and Soviet embassies attempting to get a visa to enter Cuba. The CIA's subsequent actions showed considerable confusion on its part. For example, the Mexico City station of the CIA, in the wake of the assassination, supplied to U.S. authorities photos of a man at one of the embassies it claimed was Oswald; the man was obviously someone else. Was this nor-

mal bureaucratic confusion or the tipoff that some covert shenanigans were afoot?

In spite of rampant suspicion and various anomalies in the historical record, hard evidence that Oswald was working for or manipulated by the CIA is absent.

The Mafia

If any group had good reason to want President Kennedy gone, it was the mob. Robert Kennedy had mounted a vigorous campaign against the Mafia from the attorney general's office, and eliminating John would largely neuter Robert.

There are multiple reports of various Mafiosi making threats against John Kennedy's life — although many of them are from questionable sources. There are also some late-appearing "confessions" from Mafia types, including a prison confession from New Orleans Mafia boss Carlos Marcello and a reported deathbed confession from Tampa Mafia chieftain Santos Trafficante. But conspiracy author Anthony Summers showed that the Trafficante confession could not have actually happened, and the Marcello confession was late in the mobster's life, when his mental capacity had badly deteriorated. Further, any confession from a mobster looks more like a boast than the baring of a guilty conscience.

Oswald had only the most tenuous and distant connections with the Mafia. His New Orleans uncle, Charles "Dutz" Murrett, was a bookmaker, an occupation that probably required the acquiescence of the Mafia to practice. But the uncle took a very negative view of his nephew, his left-wing politics and his chronic unwillingness to properly support his wife and child.

While the Mafia's ability to murder people is not in doubt, most conspiracy theorists believe there was a wide-ranging cover-up involving tampering with evidence, intimidating many witnesses, corrupting a large number of investigators and compromising most media outlets. It's doubtful the mob had the ability to do all this.

12:29 p.m.

Moved by the large crowd, Nellie Connally, the wife of Texas Governor John Connally, turns to the president and says, "Mr. Kennedy, you can't say that Dallas doesn't love you."

12:30 p.m.

Three shots ring out in quick succession. Kennedy is killed by a blow to the head; Governor Connally is wounded. An estimated 200,000 Dallas residents had seen Kennedy during his motorcade; another 2,600 still wait at the luncheon.

12:34 p.m.

A United Press International bulletin is transmitted around the world. It reads simply, "THREE SHOTS WERE FIRED AT PRESIDENT KENNEDY'S MOTORCADE TODAY IN DOWNTOWN DALLAS." The bulletin reaches a plane over the Pacific that contains six cabinet secretaries flying to Japan for a trade conference. Unsure of what is happening and fearing a Russian plot, they order the plane back to Washington.

12:36 p.m.

The motorcade arrives at Parkland Hospital. Secret Service agents form a protective cordon around Lyndon Johnson, addressing him as Mr. President. Jackie Kennedy is lying atop her husband's body, repeating, "They murdered my husband."

Vietnam Hawks

Central to many conspiracy theories is Vietnam. Many conspiracists claim that Kennedy was intent on a quick withdrawal of American forces and aid from that Southeast Asia nation. The theory holds that this angered various Cold Warriors, including many in the CIA, the military and the military-industrial complex. Replacing Kennedy with Johnson allowed the war (and war profits) to ramp up.

Some witnesses claim Kennedy was intent on immediately withdrawing from Vietnam, but these people are almost all friends and loyal retainers, and they invariably came forward after the war became highly controversial and unpopular. Ken-

nedy's public statements in late 1963 were hawkish. In a September interview, he flatly told Walter Cronkite: "I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake." In a speech that Kennedy was to deliver at the Dallas Trade Mart had the motorcade reached its destination, Kennedy referred to nations under Communist threat, saying, "Our assistance to these nations can be painful, risky and costly, as is true in Southeast Asia today. But we dare not weary of the task."

John's brother Robert, interviewed in April 1964, said that "the president felt that ... he had a strong, overwhelming reason for being in Vietnam and that we should win the war in Vietnam." When asked,

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**About
12:45
p.m.**

Word reaches the confused crowd at the Trade Mart that there have been shots.

12:50 p.m.

Jackie is ushered into the room where John Kennedy's body rests. She kisses the body and puts her ring on his finger.

**12:59
p.m.**

Oswald returns to his rooming house in the Oak Cliff section of Dallas. He grabs a pistol and leaves.

**1:00
p.m.**

Kennedy is officially pronounced dead by the doctors at Parkland Memorial Hospital.

1:12 p.m.

Responding to eyewitness accounts, police search the Texas School Book Depository. They find a barricade of boxes, three spent cartridges and a paper bag by a window on the sixth floor. Later they find a rifle stuffed between boxes.

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“There was never any consideration given to pulling out?” his answer was a flat, simple “no.”

There is no doubt that Kennedy and his foreign-policy advisors wanted to have the vast majority of Americans out of Vietnam by the end of 1965, by which time the South Vietnamese would, hopefully, be able to fight off the Communist invasion. We cannot know what Kennedy would have done if confronted with the dire choice Johnson faced in 1965: Escalate or allow the Communists to take over in the South. Nobody could have known in November 1963, including John Kennedy.

Anti-Castro Cubans

Conspiracists correctly point out that anti-Castro Cuban exiles in the United States were irate about

John Kennedy’s failure to provide the military support that would have made the Bay of Pigs invasion a success. On the other hand, they fail to mention Kennedy’s strong public anti-Castro rhetoric in the years after that fiasco. On Dec. 29, 1962, Kennedy appeared before what press reports described as “40,000 emotion-choked Cubans” in Miami and accepted the flag of Brigade 2506, the unit that landed at the Bay of Pigs. Kennedy assured the crowd that the flag would one day fly over a “free Havana.”

Oswald did have contact with anti-Castro Cubans. For example, in the summer of 1963, he walked into a store owned by New Orleans activist Carlos Bringuier and offered his services to the anti-Castro cause. Oswald’s own explanation for this, in a manuscript that has been dubbed his revolutionary resumé,

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1:16 p.m.

Reports reach police that patrolman J.D. Tippit has been shot in Oak Cliff. Local reporter Eddie Barker is the first journalist to announce that Kennedy is dead.

1:26 p.m.

Johnson leaves the hospital in an unmarked police car driven by the Dallas police chief. The police, unsure if there are additional gunmen, tell Johnson to slump down in the backseat.

Assistant press secretary Malcolm Kilduff confirms to the waiting media that Kennedy has been killed.

1:31 p.m.

2:00 p.m.

Johnson calls Attorney General Robert Kennedy and asks where he should take the oath of office, immediately in Dallas or later in Washington. Kennedy advises Johnson to take the oath as soon as possible. Johnson calls a local judge and family friend, Sarah Hughes, who administers the oath.



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was that he was attempting to infiltrate the anti-Castro movement.

One Cuban exile, a woman named Sylvia Odio, testified that Oswald, with two anti-Castro Cubans, visited her apartment one night in late September 1963. While Odio's testimony was almost certainly sincere, hard evidence puts Oswald in Houston on that evening, and she was apparently mistaken.

The FBI

Virtually no conspiracy theorists believe the FBI mounted a plot to assassinate Kennedy, but almost all of them believe the bureau worked, in the aftermath of the shooting, to cover up a conspiracy. Some believe that the FBI knew of the plot in advance and allowed it to come to fruition. Oswald was repeatedly on the FBI's radar, first when he returned from the Soviet Union, again when he started a chapter of the

Fair Play for Cuba Committee in New Orleans, and then when he returned from Mexico City.

The FBI certainly covered up one embarrassing connection it had with Oswald: a note he left at Dallas FBI headquarters several days before the assassination for Agent James Hosty. On the afternoon Oswald was shot by Jack Ruby, Hosty's superior ordered him to destroy the note, which he did. The bureau concealed the incident until it leaked out in the 1970s.

This has led conspiracists to claim that Oswald was an asset or informant for Hosty, had somehow infiltrated an assassination plot, and was trying to warn the Bureau — an interpretation enshrined in the 1991 movie *JFK*. The weight of the evidence, however, shows that Oswald was irked that Hosty, assigned to keep track of Oswald in the wake of his visit to Mexico City, tried to question his wife on

1:50 p.m.

Oswald is arrested at the Texas Theatre after a witness to the Tippit shooting leads police there. He attempts to shoot one of the arresting officers.

2:12 p.m.

The casket containing John Kennedy is loaded into a hearse. Jackie rides with the casket in the back of the hearse.

2:28 p.m.

With the curtains drawn aboard Air Force One, Lyndon Baines Johnson is sworn in as the 36th president of the United States. Jackie stands to his left at the brief ceremony.

2:47 p.m.

Air Force One leaves Dallas.

5:25 p.m.

Kennedy's body arrives at Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland. Jackie and several aides accompany it.

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two occasions. Oswald expressed his displeasure both to his wife, Marina, and to Ruth Paine, with whom Marina was staying, and told both women that he would contact the FBI to complain. He apparently did so, and the Dallas FBI, fearful of being scapegoated for provoking Oswald to kill Kennedy (or for failing to properly track Oswald), destroyed embarrassing evidence.

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Communists

Given Oswald's quite open leftist beliefs, connecting him to some Communist government or movement might seem plausible. One theory holds that the Oswald who defected to the Soviet Union in 1959 was replaced by a Soviet agent, a fake Oswald who returned to the United States in 1962 and eventually killed the president. For this to be true, Soviet intelligence would have had to find a doppelgänger able to fool Oswald's mother and brother, both of whom accepted that the man who returned from the USSR was their blood kin.

Some sources finger Oswald as an agent of the Cuban government. Gilberto Alvarado came forward three days after the assassination and claimed he had been in the Cuban Consulate in Mexico City and seen "a red-haired Negro" give Oswald \$6,500 to kill Kennedy. Under questioning, he retracted his story and then retracted his retraction. He claimed this happened on Sept. 18, 1963, but Oswald was known to have been in New Orleans on that day.

An apparently reliable source — a high official in the Communist Party USA who was also an FBI informant — said Fidel Castro told him that Oswald had threatened to kill Kennedy when he was in the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City. Oswald clearly threw a tantrum when he found officials there unwilling to immediately grant him a visa to enter Cuba. If he actually made the threat, those officials might not have taken it seriously. Then again, perhaps the details of what happened at the embassy were mangled as they made their way through the bureaucracy to Castro.

While Castro was a brutal dictator, he was shrewd and knew that mounting a plot to kill a U.S. president would be absurdly reckless, as it would invite an invasion and the overthrow of his regime.

Lyndon Johnson

Asking who benefited from the assassination immediately points to Vice President Lyndon Johnson, who ascended to the presidency on Kennedy's

President Johnson arrives at the White House.

5:26 p.m.

7:10 p.m.

Oswald is arraigned for the murder of Officer Tippit.

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7:20 p.m.

President Johnson writes notes to John Jr. and Caroline. He writes to Caroline, "He was a wise and devoted man. You can always be proud of what he did for this country."

Nov. 23, 1963

2:30 a.m.

His aides leave President Johnson's bedroom. They have been watching the news and making plans for the next day.

3:34 a.m.

The casket containing Kennedy's body arrives at the White House. Jackie, still wearing her blood-covered pink dress, greets the casket.

death. One witness clearly implicates Johnson. Madeleine Brown, who claimed to have been Johnson's mistress and even to have borne a son by him, told of a party on the eve of the assassination at the house of Texas oil millionaire Clint Murchison. Johnson supposedly said, "After tomorrow, those goddamn Kennedys will never embarrass me again — that's no threat — that's a promise!" But researcher David Perry has shown that the party never happened. Several of the people Brown places there (Richard Nixon, J. Edgar Hoover and Johnson himself) are known to have been elsewhere on that evening. Brown's credibility is not enhanced by the fact that in 1992 she was found guilty of forgery by a Texas jury.



The murky and littered landscape of JFK assassination conspiracy theories has not produced a clear, coherent, compelling alternative to rival the conclusion of the Dallas Police and the Warren Commission that Oswald did it by himself. That fact, of course, hardly rules out a conspiracy. However, any plausible conspiracy must include Lee Harvey Oswald. The hard evidence against him (ballistic, handwriting and photographic) is very strong, and conspiracists' claims that it was all faked, forged or tampered with are implausible.

Did Oswald have help? If he did, it's not reasonable to think that hundreds of government officials and private citizens were involved in the plot and cover-up. Might a few rogue CIA agents have manipulated Oswald? Might one or a handful of domestic leftists or Castro supporters have provoked Oswald and perhaps aided him? These scenarios are not absurdly farfetched, but it's unlikely that after 50 years we will ever find the hard evidence to prove it. [JFK]

John McAdams is a professor at Marquette University. He is the author of JFK Assassination Logic: How to Think about Claims of Conspiracy.

3:40 a.m.

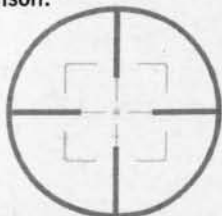
After a brief religious ceremony, Kennedy's aides rest for the night.

4:00 a.m.

Investigators in Chicago find the coupon Oswald used to order his rifle through the mail.

6:00 a.m.

Press Secretary Pierre Salinger, who spent the night at the White House, is awakened by a phone call from President Johnson.



7:00 a.m.

The last telegrams are sent inviting close friends and family to a morning Mass in the East Room.

8:00 a.m.

Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell Taylor and Army Secretary Cyrus Vance head to Arlington Cemetery to scout possible locations for Kennedy's grave.

In Hyannis Port, Ted Kennedy sits at his ailing father's bedside and tells him that his son, the president, has been killed.