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IN SEARCH OF VERITAS: KENNEDY ASSASSINATION CONSPIRACY
THEORIES AND THE EMERGENCE OF AN AMERICAN CULTURE OF
SUSPICION, 1963-1993.

By

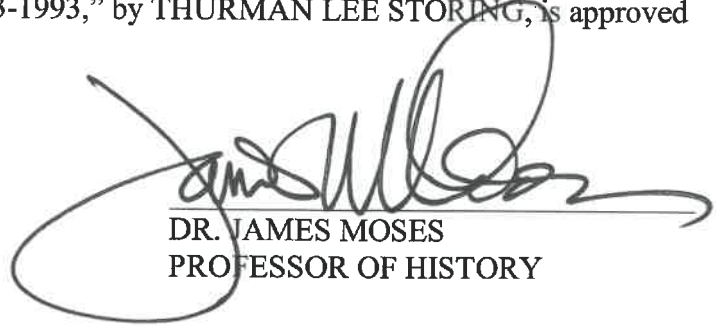
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Thesis Approval


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Abstract

“In Search of Veritas: Kennedy Assassination Conspiracy Theories and the Emergence of an American Culture of Suspicion, 1963-1993” argues that the evolving theories and concepts contained in the literature and media surrounding the Kennedy assassination demonstrate the deteriorating trust in American government institutions that resulted from the political and social climate of the 1960s through the 1980s. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963 in Dallas, Texas, marked a pivotal and horrific point in American history. The shocking murder and unanswered questions that surrounded the young president’s death traumatized the nation, leaving a psychological wound that persists decades after the event. Utilizing both primary and secondary sources, including assassination literature, public opinion polls, and scholarly articles, the work contends that acceptance of Kennedy assassination theories represented a broader symptom of distrust in public government and reflected how Americans felt of their own history and national trajectory in the latter part of the twentieth century. From substantial to absurd, the theories around President Kennedy’s shocking death reflect a pursuit for personal meaning; one designed to provide a sense of closure to the American public in the wake of the public tragedies and political turmoil in the three decades after the assassination.

Keywords: Kennedy assassination; conspiracy theories; government distrust; cultural history; Late Twentieth Century America.

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Introduction: In Search of Veritas

Between 1963 and 1993, the assassination of President Kennedy, coupled with the social and political unrest in America in the latter decades of the twentieth century, led to a unique cultural moment in American history. The question of conspiracy in the assassination, whether real or imagined, altered the perception not only of a historical event but reflected a change in how Americans viewed their government and themselves in the subsequent three decades after the president's death. The theories put forth by the Kennedy assassination conspiracy movement, beginning in the mid-1960s, not only created a counter-narrative to the government's official version of events but demonstrated the malleability of a historical event. As the event drifted further away from present and into memory, the assassination took on new meaning and definition. While some theories presented valid criticism, others served as a mirror of how Americans wished to immortalize their own history at a specific point in time.

By the mid-1970s, most Americans rejected the official government version of the assassination. It had become a fairy tale, a government perpetuated myth. Although initially accepted, public trust in it had faltered. By 1976, nearly nine out of ten Americans doubted the official conclusion: that, on the crowded streets of downtown Dallas on November 22, 1963, one man had acted alone in the shooting death of President John F. Kennedy.¹ To millions of Americans, the events surrounding the death of one of their most beloved and revered leaders nearly fifteen years previous functioned

¹ George H. Gallup, "Do you think that one man was responsible for the assassination of President Kennedy, or do you think others were involved?" December 10-13, 1976, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinions 1972-1977*, vol. 2, 1976-1977 (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1978), 927. Public opinion on the assassination has historically favored belief in conspiracy, with an average of sixty percent. The mid-1970s, however, yielded the highest percentage of acceptance in a conspiracy.

as the catalyst that unleashed a domino effect of unfortunate events on the country. Thousands of pages of publications and articles discussed it at length and picked at every minute detail. Many Americans doubted the possibility that a single bullet fired by a single assassin could inflict several wounds on two grown men in a moving automobile as the president's commission had told them. After the murder of President Kennedy, they watched as their country descended into a madness of unwinnable war, civil and social unrest, and a string of political scandals that shook the foundation of authority. They witnessed a graphic amateur film, that had been hidden from public view for over a decade, which appeared to show the President hit from the front, not behind as the government had told them. By 1976, the continued public outcry forced Congress to finally act and begin an official reinvestigation, but fears of subterfuge and dishonesty remained.² Reflecting the sentiments held by many Americans of the era, journalist and author Robert Sam Anson wrote in 1975 that, "the revelations of the past few years have shown that...conspiracy is as American as apple pie."³

In many respects, the assassination became a flashpoint in American history. To conspiracy theorists, the assassination of President Kennedy represented the point where the forces of darkness took over and the country entered a strange and terrible reality. A cynical uncertainty and sense of betrayal unseated the optimism generated by President Kennedy's promise of a "new frontier."⁴ This viewpoint, though, represented a flawed interpretation that ignored tensions that had been building for decades. Anxieties and paranoia triggered by the Cold War with the Soviet Union existed well before the 1963

² Robert Sam Anson, *"They've Killed the President!": The Search for the Murderers of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), 1-3.

³ Anson, *"They've Killed the President!"*, 5.

⁴ Anson, *"They've Killed the President!"*, 3-4.

assassination of President Kennedy. Factors such as redbaiting by politicians and an advanced and growing military presence spread further distrust that surfaced in later years. Both external and internal threats haunted the thoughts of a society only a button's push away from nuclear annihilation.⁵

The conspiracy that the critics claimed existed lacked any form of central identity. Other than a revolving collection of names and groups that passed in and out of vogue depending on what was occurring in the country at the time, the assassins' identities remained nebulous. Proof of the plotters' actions or existence likewise continued to be ambiguous. Although the initial critics of the government's official report envisioned the assassination as a small right-wing group of confederates or a plot perpetrated by Cuban sympathizers, the number of culprits and the scope of the conspiracy steadily increased. By the 1990s, the possible suspects list included nearly every intelligence group within the United States government, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, and even extraterrestrial visitors, to name a few.⁶

This thesis suggests that conspiracy theories, such as those addressing the Kennedy assassination, represent a specific public reaction to changes in the latter half of the twentieth century. The evolution of Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories altered the very definition of conspiracy theories in American society. Instead of merely

⁵ Robert J. McMahon, *The Cold War: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 116-121.

⁶ Although several titles claim to expose the "real" perpetrators behind President Kennedy's assassination, some stand out above the others in their scope and imagination. For a key example that implicates an enormous government conspiracy as the culprits of the Kennedy murder, see Peter Dale Scott, *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). For a text that profiles President Johnson's alleged involvement, see Craig I. Zirbel, *The Texas Connection: The Assassination of John F. Kennedy* (Scottsdale: TCC Publishers, 1991). For a book that ties President Kennedy's assassination to his supposed knowledge of United States intelligence involvement with extraterrestrial visitors, see William Cooper, *Behold a Pale Horse* (Flagstaff: Light Technology Publishing, 1991).

signifying two or more individuals engaged in a plot, assassination theories transformed conspiracy into an all-out attack on authority. Belief in conspiracy theories justified powerful feelings of frustration regarding the course of American society after 1963, and growing mistrust in government. Influenced by events such as the Vietnam War, Watergate, the Iran-Contra Scandal, and a perceived deterioration of American values and ideas, Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories cultivated a culture of suspicion that defined American socio-political culture. Although many of these theories did not achieve mainstream success, they fueled further suspicions of deception and mistrust. The underlying foundation of doubt generated by the conspiracy theorists allowed both supported and unsupported theories to survive.⁷

The myriad assassination-related materials present in late twentieth-century American culture also demonstrate that an increasingly suspicious and distrustful American people were more than willing to buy into the sometimes-absurd ideas and theories expressed by conspiracy theorists. If anything, the evolution of the assassination narrative demonstrated the acceptance of conspiracy theories into mainstream thinking. Not all of the Kennedy assassination conspiracists existed on the fringes of society; many of them were educated, sensible people who passionately pursued their definition of the truth. Not only did average people buy books concerning the assassination or watch assassination related movies and programming in theaters or on television, they also sparked intense public debate and discussed the latest theories at Kennedy assassination-themed conventions. To many, the conspiracists' theories provided an explanation that

⁷ Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 134-135, 145-146; Peter Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination* (University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 4.

seemed more practical and intricate than the simple and detached government explanation that Lee Harvey Oswald had acted alone. The American public accepted the conspiracy theorists' methods of coping with the president's death: by essentially reliving that fateful day in November and searching for their own degree of meaningful closure.⁸

Historian William Manchester attempted to explain the widespread public belief in Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories. In a 1992 editorial piece for *The New York Times*, Manchester wrote that Americans rejected the official government version of the assassination because the crime appeared imbalanced. Utilizing a metaphor, Manchester wrote, "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." He continued, "...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." According to Manchester, widespread belief in conspiracy provided meaning for the president's tragic death and balanced the scales.⁹

While illuminating, Manchester's explanation for conspiracy belief only scratches the surface. The development of a conspiracy-dominated Kennedy assassination narrative accounted for more than the death of the President of the United States. Conspiracy theories offered a seemingly tangible explanation for intense changes in the latter half of

⁸ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 94-100.

⁹ William Manchester, "No Evidence for a Conspiracy to Kill Kennedy," *The New York Times*, February 5, 1992, A22. Manchester is notable for writing *The Death of a President: November 20 – November 25, 1963* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1967). Initially written with the support of the Kennedy family, Manchester's work generated an immense amount of publicity and controversy. The Kennedy family ordered that Manchester remove unflattering passages prior to publication. Manchester also turned a substantial profit by selling chapters in advance to major print publications for tens of thousands of dollars.

the twentieth century. Conspiracy theories not only imbued President Kennedy's death with meaning, they also provided an effective and emotionally resonant lament for the apparent disappearance of postwar American values and prosperity.

This thesis represents a markedly different approach to the common “who-done-it” pursuits of armchair Kennedy assassination researchers. The arguments and disagreements over the number of shots, shooters, and the involvement of individuals or groups is a debate that is likely to continue to rage on into the distant future. The Kennedy assassination remains one of American history's most-written about events with coverage extending into the twenty-first century.¹⁰ However, this thesis does not concern itself with adding to the often tired, divisive, and infinite arguments that purport to “solve” the event itself. Instead, this work details the creation and evolution of the assassination narrative; the way that the event and its components have been interpreted, altered, and accepted in the years and decades since that unfortunate Friday in November 1963. Although proponents of the government sanctioned narrative factor significantly into this synthesis and analysis, the focus of this work is primarily on the efforts of the conspiracy theorists and how they established a self-perpetuating counter-narrative that reflected their own interpretations of the event. These intense efforts also led to the creation of a lucrative cottage industry based on the continued speculations of the conspiracy theorists and fueled by the premise of obsession, mystery, and doubt. More

¹⁰ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 106. For a few notable titles released in the new millennium, see *Murder in Dealey Plaza: What We Know Now that We Didn't Know Then about the Death of JFK*, ed. James H. Fetzer (Chicago: Catfeet Press, 2000); Douglas P. Horne, *Inside the Assassination Records Review Board: The U.S. Government's Final Attempt to Reconcile the Conflicting Medical Evidence in the Assassination of JFK*, vol. I-IV (self-published, 2009); Sherry P. Fiester, *Enemy of the Truth: Myths, Forensics, and the Kennedy Assassination* (Southlake: JFK Lancer Productions & Publications, Inc., 2012); James DiEugenio, *Reclaiming Parkland: Tom Hanks, Vincent Bugliosi, and the JFK Assassination in the New Hollywood* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2013)

than any other group, the conspiracists created a paradigm shift in how Americans symbolized the assassination and became more receptive to conspiracy theories in general.

By affording focus to both the conspiracy theorists and the official inquiries that attempted to establish order, this work details the journey of the assassination from a relevant pursuit of justice and order to a modern mythical allegory of good versus evil in the final decades of a turbulent century. Books, articles, film, and polls from 1963 to 1993 demonstrate the progression of prevalent theories surrounding the president's tragic demise. This focus on culture reveals that the American people remained fixated on the assassination from the start.¹¹ These sources also demonstrate the speed in which conspiracy theories integrated themselves into the public perception of the assassination and how they eventually succeeded and assimilated themselves into the officially accepted narrative.

Other historians and academics have attempted to interpret the value of the Kennedy assassination in a broader cultural and historical form, one that extends beyond the confines of Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas. Both Barbie Zelizer and Peter Knight have argued that the assassination represents a cultural struggle between the government, media, and the conspiracy theorists over which group has the authoritative right to tell the assassination story.¹² In his 2001 book *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, Robert Alan Goldberg claims that the emergence of conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination were primarily motivated by emotional bias and an

¹¹ Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 34.

¹² Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 4; Zelizer, *Covering the Body*, 1-2.

attempt at reconciling loss by constructing an alternate version of events.¹³ Philip Jenkins, author of *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (2006) asserts that the assassination was the gateway toward a cultural obsession with conspiracy; one in which Americans felt that a clandestine government presence existed behind the guise of a free society.¹⁴ The memory of the assassination deeply upset the social and cultural fabric that held the nation together.

Through the critical analysis of primary and secondary sources, this study analyzes the historiography of the Kennedy assassination in a chronological narrative. John H. Arnold defines historiography in his 2003 book *History: A Very Short Introduction* as “the process of writing history.”¹⁵ According to this model, historiography represents not only the various components and causes of the historical record but also the interpretations, motivations, and mentality of those writing a historical analysis or narrative years later. This work analyzes how twentieth-century Americans interpreted a specific moment in their history and how that story was recorded and transferred into collective memory. Most significantly, this thesis highlights the persistent issue of the definition of truth in historical retelling. Some historians such as Arnold define historical knowledge as either “subjective (dependent on the observer) or objective (independent of the observer).”¹⁶ As this work demonstrates, the construction of the Kennedy assassination narrative over three decades represented an interesting spin to this historical problem. The researchers offering explanations for the motives and mechanics

¹³ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 149-150.

¹⁴ Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 53-55.

¹⁵ John H. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

¹⁶ Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, 115.

of the president's death believed they were drawing history from a well of incorruptible truth. However, feelings of subjective reasoning ultimately colored any and all forms of interpretation.

Chapter one outlines the formative years of the assassination narrative. Starting in late 1963, Americans' initial feelings toward President Kennedy's murder as well as the formation of the Warren Commission and the public reaction to the publication of its findings in the autumn of 1964. Building on initial doubts surrounding the assassination, a network of private citizens offered their own interpretation of the events of November 1963 and the Warren Commission itself. These critics generated a counter-narrative to the official explanation of the assassination. Through a series of best-selling and thought-provoking publications, these early critics developed a range of conspiracy theories that expanded significantly in subsequent decades. The conspiracists' apparent quest for truth and justice spurred the debate surrounding the president's murder. The fledgling Kennedy assassination conspiracy movement reflected a growing distrust in government accelerated by growing international and domestic tensions of the mid-1960s. These actions aided in swaying public opinion that a conspiracy had been responsible for President Kennedy's murder in Dallas. Perhaps most importantly, the clamor created by the early critics of the official narrative kept the Kennedy assassination relevant and prevented the emotional events of 1963 from fading into memory.

Chapter two covers the development of the assassination narrative from the discord of the late 1960s into the full paranoia of the early-to-mid 1970s. In 1968, the exposure of a high-profile investigation of the case by New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison and the subsequent criminal trial of businessman Clay Shaw in 1969 represented

a crossroads moment for conspiracist ideologies involving the assassination. Although unfounded and derided by the American media and authorities, Garrison's efforts symbolized a transformation. Differing from early critics, Garrison infused the conspiracy movement with anti-war sentiment and a sense of nostalgia that would blossom as political scandals overtook the nation in the 1970s. By the mid-1970s, conspiracy theories involving the Kennedy assassination had become the norm. They manifested themselves into popular culture and became a profitable industry. By 1976, the mass public appeal of conspiracy theories, the widespread loss of trust in federal institutions, and the public broadcast of an 8mm home movie of the president's murder on national television forced the United States government to action.

Chapter three begins in the early stages of the formation of the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) and follows the evolution of its reinvestigation into the President's murder. The committee embodied the government's attempt at forging a new, more socially acceptable narrative. This new examination incorporated conspiracist ideas into its fabric. The committee even entertained some of the conspiracists' most outrageous claims during its study. After an intensive and rocky investigation, the committee published its findings in 1979. In a reversal from the Warren Commission, the committee found that President Kennedy died as the result of a probable conspiracy. However, reaction to the committee's verdict elicited a lukewarm response from the public due to the overexposure and exhaustion of conspiracy theories by the end of the 1970s. Although conspiracy theories remained prevalent after the publication of the committee's findings, fatigue set in. Continued fracturing from within the

assassination research community further marginalized and stifled the cohesion of the conspiracists.

The final chapter records the events between 1983 and 1993, the thirtieth anniversary of the president's assassination. During this period, the quest to discover the truth about the president's assassination no longer represented a pursuit of active justice but had transformed into the construction of a modern American myth. The details of the assassination became permanently inseparable from subjective feelings and dashed attempts at objective truth. Many who were alive when President Kennedy was killed looked fondly back at the early 1960s and grew increasingly disillusioned with the direction that the country had gone since that time. The conspiracy movement quickly gained a renewed footing with the publication of new books, generating new interest in the assassination with each passing year. The sensational release and overtly conspiratorial content of Oliver Stone's 1991 blockbuster film *JFK* created a persuasive countermyth to the official government narrative. In *JFK*'s aftermath, fact, fiction, and entertainment became indistinguishable from one another involving the events that occurred in Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963. At this point, definitive and objective truth in the assassination had grown as blurred and fleeting as the grainy images purported by conspiracy theorists to show assassins hiding in the shadows on the Grassy Knoll.

From the early 1960s to the early 1990s, the construction of an encompassing narrative concerning the Kennedy assassination represented an intriguing nexus of history and myth. The product of this fusion of fact and fiction created varying degrees and representations of truth. Its meaning signified different things to different people at

different points in time. A lack of consensus concerning the “who,” “how,” and “why” of the assassination kept the assassination debate alive in the public mind long after the sound of gunfire in Dealey Plaza ceased. Although the theories concerning President Kennedy’s assassination often differed, they preserved and immortalized the memory of the president’s tragic demise and its impact on American culture.

The mystery and intrigue that surrounded the assassination invited the American public to actively take part in constructing their own version of events that irreparably entangled elements of history and myth. This rendering of the assassination, eventually accepted by most Americans, played out on a grand stage where forces of good and evil fought for the soul of the country. However, the physical setting for the genesis of this event could not be cut any further from the dramatic and sensational fabric of the eventual popular narrative. The first act of this drama started over the course of approximately seven seconds in perhaps the most unlikely of places: a small and peaceful city park in the heartland of America.

I. Searching the Shadows (1963-1967)

He remembered leaving his camera at home. Abraham Zapruder, a Dallas dressmaker and co-owner of Jennifer Juniors of Dallas, wanted to film the presidential motorcade that was to pass through the heart of downtown Dallas to the Dallas Trade Mart as a memento for his family. Zapruder, a Ukrainian immigrant and an admirer of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, had been persuaded by his secretaries to drive back to his house to get his camera. Although the weather had been rainy in the earlier morning hours on Friday, November 22, 1963, sunlight, blue skies, and mild temperatures greeted Zapruder as he returned to his home to retrieve his Bell and Howell 8mm color home movie camera.¹

Arriving back at his office with his camera, Zapruder decided to film the approaching motorcade from the small, triangular-shaped park named Dealey Plaza visible from his office at the Dal-Tex Building. Along with his secretary Marilyn Sitzman, he found an elevated position near a concrete pergola on the north side of Elm Street near the Texas School Book Depository to film the president. Seeing a group of motorcycle policemen turning onto Elm Street, Zapruder shot a few brief seconds of film before realizing that the presidential limousine containing the president, Mrs. Kennedy, Texas Governor John Connally, and his wife Nellie, was further down Houston Street. Hearing the enthusiastic sound of the crowd and visibly seeing the presidential limousine making the turn from Houston onto Elm Street, Zapruder lifted the viewfinder of his

¹ Alexandra Zapruder, *Twenty-Six Seconds: A Personal History of the Zapruder Film* (New York: Twelve, 2016), 58-62, 71; David R. Wrone, *The Zapruder Film: Reframing JFK's Assassination* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2003), 9.

8mm home movie camera to his face at approximately 12:30 PM CST.² The following twenty-six seconds captured by Zapruder and his camera became the defining record of President Kennedy's assassination.

Despite its jarring clarity and completeness, the events depicted in the split-second frames of Zapruder's film became the centerpiece of a raging national debate that extended three decades beyond President Kennedy's unfortunate murder. The question of what exactly happened in Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963 aided in transforming America's collective social identity beginning in the middle-1960s. Interpretations of the Kennedy assassination represented not only the opinions of the researchers engaged in exposing the apparent truth behind the murder of the president, but also reflected Americans' shifting perceptions concerning their institutions and the role of government in their daily lives. Heightened by Cold War tensions and anxiety, feelings of distrust in the government were not a new phenomenon. The Kennedy assassination, however, further drove a wedge into the relationship between the American public and its government. The conspiracists and their works mirrored the feelings of a changing and anxiety-ridden country, now facing an uncertain future following the brutal slaying of its young leader. The assassination became not only a search for truth and justice but also a way of coping emotionally with the changes in America during the latter half of the twentieth century. Although the theories surrounding the president's death were often disorganized, misleading, or outrageous, the central argument of conspiracy engrained itself into American social and cultural consciousness.

² Wrono, *The Zapruder Film*, 10-11; Richard B. Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film: Mr. Zapruder's Home Movie and the Murder of President Kennedy* (Danvers: Yeoman Press, 2005), 35-37.

The budding conspiracy movement did not come to fruition until the mid-1960s, but contradiction and mistruths in the immediate aftermath of the president's death planted and watered the seeds of doubt the weekend of the assassination. Confusion enveloped the country from the moment the gunfire ceased in Dallas. Witnesses to the assassination expressed confusion as to where shots had originated. Both law enforcement and spectators swarmed a small hill that overlooked Elm Street in Dallas apparently searching for an assassin. Other police officers encircled the Texas School Book Depository Building at the corner of Houston and Elm Streets after spectators reported hearing shots from an upper floor. Reporters, who had been in the vicinity of the shooting, either rushed to Dealey Plaza or Parkland Hospital (where the president was undergoing emergency medical treatment) or ran back to their respective media organizations to report the news of the president's shooting.³

These news reports issued either by television, radio, or newspaper reached millions of Americans outside of Dallas and often contained distortions, and were incomplete.⁴ In an era before twenty-four-hour news coverage, many Americans first heard of President Kennedy's assassination through word-of-mouth from friends or family members.⁵ Coupled with the sometimes confusing and erroneous reporting by journalists, the dissemination of information via personal contact created a real-life game of "telephone" that further added to the rumor mill surrounding the assassination in Dallas. Many of these rumors persisted well after November 22, 1963.

³ Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 51-55.

⁴ Peter Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 10.

⁵ Thomas J. Banta, "The Kennedy Assassination: Early Thoughts and Emotions," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1964): 218-219, accessed January 18, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2746987>.

Aside from the whirlwind amount of information that deluged Americans glued to their respective media outlets, the capture and subsequent murder of the alleged assassin added further issues and intrigue. Less than two hours after President Kennedy's murder, Dallas Police arrested an employee of the Texas School Book Depository named Lee Harvey Oswald. Dallas Police accused the former Soviet defector and political malcontent of shooting the president, fleeing Dealey Plaza, and then killing patrolman J.D. Tippit before his apprehension in the Oak Cliff section of Dallas. While in police custody, authorities paraded Oswald in front of reporters and made statements that Oswald was undoubtedly the assassin. With the eyes of the world's media upon him, Oswald persistently denied the charges of shooting the president or killing Officer Tippit. Oswald even claimed to be a patsy, or fall-guy, for the true perpetrators of the assassination. Only two days after Oswald's arrest, a Dallas nightclub owner named Jack Ruby shot and killed Oswald as he was transported to the county jail from police headquarters on live television. With Oswald dead, a confession and/or criminal trial became impossible. Any knowledge that Oswald may have held died with him, leaving the nation with more unanswered questions.

In the weeks and months following President Kennedy's murder on November 22, 1963, opinion divided the American public over the question of who or what forces were responsible. News of the assassination deeply upset Americans in all parts of the country. Polls conducted indicated that Americans felt extreme anger during the weekend of the assassination.⁶ Opinion regarding persons or groups responsible for the crime varied. Prior to the official response, nearly seventy percent of Americans believed Oswald was

⁶ Banta, "The Kennedy Assassination: Early Thoughts and Emotions," 222.

not the lone assassin.⁷ According to a poll conducted by *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, nearly two-thirds suspected a mentally unstable individual or individuals committed the crime. Of those who felt that a conspiracy was responsible for the president's death, some thirty percent believed the assassin (or assassins) harbored extremist right-wing political views and stood in opposition to the president's stance on civil rights and foreign policy. Others suspected individuals supporting Cuba, the Soviet Union, or other communist regimes or ideologies murdered President Kennedy.⁸ In the immediate aftermath of the assassination, the conspiracy suspected by a large demographic of Americans remained a faceless and vague enemy.

In the immediate aftermath of the assassination, the specter of conspiracy haunted the minds of politicians and lawmen in Washington D.C. Both President Lyndon B. Johnson and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director J. Edgar Hoover recognized the importance of quelling rumors of conspiracy. To both Johnson and Hoover, speculation around the assassination could create a potentially damaging international situation since some Americans believed President Kennedy had been killed as the result of a communist plot.⁹ Oswald's background as a former Soviet defector only made matters worse. The thought of nuclear war between the United States of America and the Soviet Union remained a real possibility even after the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Others, such as Deputy Attorney General Nicolas Katzenbach, told Johnson the conspiracy rumors needed to be dealt with as quickly as possible. He sent a confidential memo to President Johnson stating the case needed to be cinched with Oswald as the sole

⁷ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 65.

⁸ Banta "The Kennedy Assassination: Early Thoughts and Emotions," 220.

⁹ Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven, 2001), 106-107.

assassin, and that a definitive account of the assassination should be delivered to the American public.¹⁰

In response to his correspondence with other figures in the federal government, President Johnson issued Executive Order 11130 on November 29, 1963, creating a special investigative committee chaired by a group of prominent government officials with impeccable integrity.¹¹ Johnson realized the importance of selecting a respected and recognized figurehead for the commission and was convinced that Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren should head the investigation. Warren, a former governor of California, remained a well-respected, progressive figure who had been the architect of the landmark ruling in 1954's *Brown v. Board of Education* case. Although initially reluctant to join the commission, Warren deferred to Johnson's request and accepted the offer of committee chairman. Johnson reminded Warren of the international implications of an unresolved investigation that might possibly trigger a catastrophic nuclear response.¹²

With Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren at the helm, several members of Congress and other governmental associates also composed the upper hierarchy of the officially titled President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy, although the investigation would become more commonly known as the Warren Commission. In order to maintain a balanced investigation in the public eye, Johnson selected six other members from a diverse political spectrum to be part of the commission. From the United States Senate, Johnson chose Democratic Senator Richard

¹⁰ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 43-44.

¹¹ Wrone, *The Zapruder Film*, 38.

¹² Robert Sam Anson, "*They've Killed the President!*" *The Search for the Murderers of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), 39-40.

Russell, Jr. of Georgia and Republican Senator John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky. Johnson also appointed Democratic Congressman Hale Boggs of Louisiana and Republican Congressman Gerald Ford of Michigan. Former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director Allen Dulles and former World Bank president John J. McCloy rounded out the final seats of the commission.¹³ To the media and the public, the Warren Commission appeared as a fair and honorable investigative body that would set the record straight on the truth behind President Kennedy's assassination.

Despite the public focus on the higher members of the commission appointed by President Johnson, the Warren Commission's legal counsel members, headed by former United States Solicitor General J. Lee Rankin, conducted most of the commission's work throughout 1964. The commission's lawyers handled the construction of a timetable of the assassination by interviewing witnesses and digging through Oswald's personal life to discern a possible motive. Warren Commission Chief Counsel Rankin tasked the FBI and Secret Service with handling the ballistic, medical, and forensic evidence.¹⁴ In order to prevent their staff and resources from further strain of time and funding, the commission utilized investigative branches already in existence. This form of partnership with the FBI would later prove problematic.¹⁵

After a near yearlong investigation into President Kennedy's assassination and shortly before the 1964 presidential election, in which Johnson was the Democratic nominee, the Warren Commission officially published its findings on September 29, 1964. The committee found that Lee Harvey Oswald had acted alone in assassinating

¹³ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 43; Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 109.

¹⁴ Anson, "They've Killed the President!", 41-42; Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 45.

¹⁵ Wrone, *The Zapruder Film*, 38.

President Kennedy on November 22, 1963. The commission's report presented evidence that Oswald had fired three shots from the southeastern corner window on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository Building.¹⁶ The investigation into the President's murder also substantiated that Oswald murdered Dallas police officer J.D. Tippit shortly after the president's assassination.¹⁷ The commission's report clearly and adamantly denied that Oswald acted in concert with any confederates and depicted Oswald as an unstable loner and political dissident. To the commission, there existed "no evidence that anyone assisted Oswald in planning or carrying out the assassination."¹⁸ Although the commission could not find any clear-cut motive for Oswald's actions, they found Oswald responsible for the assassination and felt the ballistics evidence bolstered their claim.¹⁹ If Oswald's psyche did not provide a clear picture into the mind of a murderer, the events that transpired in Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963 proved his guilt to the commission beyond a shadow of a doubt.

One of the central findings of the commission that bolstered their lone assassin scenario involved a controversial theory that both President Kennedy and Governor Connally were hit by a single bullet fired by Oswald. Although the FBI believed all the shots from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository Building hit one of the occupants in the car, pressing evidence forced the commission to develop a new scenario to explain the shooting. An issue that the investigators had to rectify involved an eyewitness to the assassination named James Tague. Tague witnessed the assassination

¹⁶ United States, President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy, *Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1964); reprint, Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 18.

¹⁷ President's Commission, *Report of the President's Commission*, 20.

¹⁸ President's Commission, *Report of the President's Commission*, 21.

¹⁹ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 111.

from the Triple Underpass in Dealey Plaza and received a superficial wound during the shooting when shrapnel from a curbstone struck his face. The commission believed that the curbstone had been hit by a missed shot.²⁰ Either one of the three shots that Oswald took at the presidential motorcade missed the car or a fourth shot had been fired from a second and unknown assassin. The commission chose to pursue the first option, believing that the errant round was either the first shot or the last shot of the sequence, and began developing a new timeline of the shooting to factor in the missed shot.

A new dilemma faced commission investigators involving the timing of the shooting. Utilizing the Zapruder film, the commission established the assassination, from first shot to third shot, lasted approximately six seconds and that Oswald's view from the sniper's nest had been blocked by a large oak tree prior to Zapruder frame 188. Experiments conducted by the FBI at the Edgewood Arsenal on Oswald's rifle indicated that it took an average of 2.3 seconds to cycle the bolt and fire the rifle. However, study of individual frames of the Zapruder film suggested that both President Kennedy and Governor Connally were hit by separate shots in less than two seconds as the presidential limousine emerged from behind the Stemmons Freeway sign into Zapruder's view. The photographic evidence garnered from the Zapruder film seemed to indicate that Oswald did not have enough time to shoot President Kennedy and then hit Governor Connally with his bolt-action Mannlicher Carcano rifle.²¹ In order to rectify this anomaly, Warren Commission attorney Arlen Specter developed a scenario in which President Kennedy and Governor Connally were struck by Oswald's second shot. Specter believed that

²⁰ President's Commission, *Report of the President's Commission*, 116.

²¹ President's Commission, *Report of the President's Commission*, 97, 117. The commission based most of these findings on the Abraham Zapruder home movie. Examination by the FBI found that one individual Zapruder frame equaled approximately one-eighteenth of a second.

Oswald fired between Zapruder frames 210 and 225.²² The shot hit President Kennedy in the upper back and exited his throat. After exiting the president's throat, the projectile proceeded to hit Governor Connally in his back, exited below his right nipple, and struck his right wrist before exiting and lodging in his left thigh. The investigator's also felt that Governor Connally's reaction to being struck had been delayed.²³

Dubbed "the single-bullet theory," the commission's explanation for the missed curb shot and President Kennedy's and Governor Connally's reaction time in the Zapruder film represented the lynchpin of the commission's single-assassin thesis. The single-bullet theory conveniently protected the commission's findings that Oswald had acted alone by offering a seemingly scientific explanation that did not require the presence and participation of another assassin. Despite its necessity to the commission's thesis, the theory possessed immediate concerns and distortions. Although investigators studied the Zapruder film, the poor-quality copy that the commission studied was several generations removed from the camera original.²⁴ The commission had also been unable to label when the shot encompassed by the single-bullet theory precisely occurred. Instead, they chose a vague range of Zapruder frames to represent their timeline. In many of these frames, the presidential limousine and its occupants were not visible. Also, Governor Connally testified that he felt he had been hit by a separate shot. Connally adamantly opposed the commission's theory that the shot, which shattered three of his ribs, had first passed through President Kennedy.²⁵ Also, some of the commission

²² President's Commission, *Report of the President's Commission*, 105-106. The commission found that a shot from the alleged sniper's nest was blocked by the limbs of a live oak prior to Zapruder frame 210.

²³ President's Commission, *Report of the President's Commission*, 93.

²⁴ Wrone, *The Zapruder Film*, 53-54.

²⁵ The New York Times, ed., *The Witnesses* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 22-23.

members themselves felt the single-bullet theory was flawed.²⁶ Although its genesis was rocky and its findings contested, the single-bullet theory remained an integral part of the commission's findings, one that would generate controversy in the decades following its publication in the Warren Report.

Despite internal issues with the commission's single-bullet theory, the news media applauded and championed the efforts and findings of the Warren Commission Report upon its publication. Major news networks and newsprint publications devoted a considerable amount of attention to the commission's belief that Oswald had acted alone in assassinating President Kennedy.²⁷ Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) dedicated an entire television special, hosted by Walter Cronkite, to the report upon its release.²⁸ The *New York Times* released a special edition issue containing the fundamental findings of the commission investigators.²⁹

To the American news media, the troubling case of the president's assassination had been solved, and their approval of the commission's explanations and actions was matched by the public at large. A Harris poll conducted shortly after the publication of *The Warren Commission Report* indicated that eighty-seven percent of the American public also found the results of the commission's yearlong investigation satisfactory and accepted the commission's thesis that the president's assassination had been the action of

²⁶ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 112-113. Senators Richard Russell, John Cooper, and Representative Hale Boggs expressed lingering doubts over the plausibility of the single-bullet theory.

²⁷ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 65.

²⁸ Walter Cronkite, "The Warren Report – CBS," *A CBS News Extra: November 22 and the Warren Report*, CBS, September 27, 1963, YouTube video, 1:58:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQCgQsgCyMY>; Goldberg, 111.

²⁹ Zelizer, *Covering the Body*, 106.

one man, not a cabal of shadowy, and possibly foreign, assailants.³⁰ The results of the Harris poll also indicated Americans still had a large degree of faith in the institutions of government. Compared to earlier polls conducted in the immediate aftermath of the assassination in which two-thirds of Americans believed two or more people had plotted to murder the president, the late 1964 Harris Poll demonstrated a nearly complete reversal. The media zeitgeist in support of the commission also helped in the report's acceptance. Not only had the Warren Commission convinced the American public that Oswald had acted alone, public support demonstrated the vast majority of Americans trusted the federal government to provide the truth.

Aside from explaining the specifics around the murder of the president, the Warren Commission Report proved beneficial in other ways. The report provided an official and exhaustive evidentiary base that the commission's supporters and opponents used to their own ends. The commission amassed hundreds of hours of witness testimonies and interviews and poured over tens of thousands of pages of documents, spending over one million dollars in its investigation. The commission also created an exhaustive variety of exhibits based around the ballistic, medical, and scientific evidence of the mechanics of the assassination.³¹ In order to achieve a degree of transparency between itself and the American public, the United States government placed the materials that the commission had used in its investigation into an additional twenty-six volume set.³² Along with the Warren Commission's report, the additional volumes were

³⁰ "Harris Poll, 10/64," in Sheldon Appleton, "Trends: Assassinations," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 495-522, accessed on September 5, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3078740>; Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 65.

³¹ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 47.

³² United States. President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy. *Hearings Before the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*, vol. I-XXVI (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1964). Along with testimonies from the

made available for purchase.³³ The immense amount of data the commission obtained and analyzed in its investigation created a detailed evidentiary groundwork that influenced discussion and theorizing of the assassination. In fact, the commission and its published materials provided a formula that other assassination-related publications followed in subsequent decades.

The published Warren Report and its ancillary twenty-six volumes of testimony and exhibits, sold out in its first two printings, demonstrating that Americans still held keen, and even obsessive, interest in President Kennedy's assassination.³⁴ Although the governmental investigation had functioned in an official capacity, the fruits of its labors and materials became a highly marketable product. Thousands of copies of the report disappeared from store bookshelves into the homes of average Americans interested in the specifics and motives behind President Kennedy's murder.³⁵

The federal government, though, was not the only institution to cash-in on the flurry of interest around the commission's report and the assassination. The American news media also linked itself to the success of the Warren Commission Report. Only two days after the release of the report, *The New York Times* devoted an entire section to the report. One article asserted that no evidence of a political conspiracy was found.³⁶ The same edition also decried all rumors of other involvement as myth.³⁷ Aside from hardbound commemorative editions of the report, inexpensive and smaller paperback

hearings, the additional twenty-six volumes of the Warren Commission's investigation included the commission's exhibits as well as black and white individual frames of the Zapruder film.

³³ "Date Due Nov. 30 on Assassination," *The New York Times*, November 20, 1964, 22.

³⁴ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 111.

³⁵ "Warren Report Still Selling," *The New York Times*, March 26, 1965, 27. Within six months of publication, the commission's report sold nearly one-hundred-fifty-thousand copies.

³⁶ Anthony Lewis, "Panel Unanimous," *The New York Times*, September 28, 1964, 1.

³⁷ Peter Kihss, "'Myths' of Case Denied in Detail," *The New York Times*, September 28, 1964, 1.

editions were also made available for sale. *The New York Times* profited from the commission's efforts in terms of publication. Aside from using their highly influential newspaper to distill and disseminate the commission findings to a nationwide audience, the editors of *The New York Times* also published an edited collection of important witness testimonies and interviews taken during the Warren Commission investigation. Published in 1965 and entitled *The Witnesses*, the book provided a more digestible and accessible distillation of the Warren Commission's twenty-six additional volumes. *The Witnesses* also offered a more affordable alternative to the costly supplemental commission materials. However, the *New York Times* publication contained flaws. The testimonies contained within its pages were often heavily edited; excising details that contradicted the Warren Commission's hypothesis.³⁸

Aside from *The New York Times*, Time-Life Inc., publishers of *Life* magazine, also profited from the publication of the Warren Report and their ownership of the Abraham Zapruder film. Representatives of *Life* purchased the film directly from Zapruder for \$150,000, and retained ownership of the camera, original film, and the printing and film rights of the controversial film that captured the president's assassination in its entirety.³⁹ During the Warren Commission's investigation, the magazine published key frames of the Zapruder film supporting the lone gunman hypothesis. *Life* even provided the commission with individual 35mm blow-ups of frames for study although the commission utilized a worn copy of the 8mm home movie for its construction of the controversial single-bullet theory.⁴⁰ Following the release of the

³⁸ Anson, "They've Killed the President!", 140-141.

³⁹ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 146.

⁴⁰ Wrone, *The Zapruder Film*, 53.

Warren Report in late 1964, *Life* magazine maintained its exclusive ownership of the Zapruder film to sell more magazines.

Outside of the world of print, the release of the Warren Report also created other streams of revenue. Released to coincide with the first anniversary of President Kennedy's death, MGM Studios released a theatrical documentary entitled *Four Days in November*. Produced by David L. Wolper and directed by Mel Stuart, the documentary presented the assassination in narrative fashion and closely followed the Warren Commission findings. The documentary followed both President Kennedy's and Lee Harvey Oswald's actions on the day of the assassination, the confusion of the subsequent weekend, and the president's burial on Monday, November 25, 1963. The film even featured recreations by several key eyewitnesses, including Wesley Buell Frasier, a co-worker of Oswald who gave the alleged assassin a lift to work on the morning of November 22, 1963 and witnessed Oswald in possession of a mysterious package which Oswald claimed contained curtain rods. Supplemental to the narrative, the producers of *Four Days in November* included scenes of the president's motorcade from the streets of Dallas, announcements of the president's death at Parkland Hospital, and the shooting of Oswald by Jack Ruby on November 24, 1963. The documentary also contained exclusive footage of the president's assassination, including a film shot by Orville Nix, which captured the fatal shot to the president's head.⁴¹ *Four Days in November* proved a successful release and garnered a nomination for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature at the 1965 Academy Awards.⁴²

⁴¹ *Four Days in November*, directed by Mel Stuart (1964; MGM Home Video, 2000), VHS.

⁴² "The 37th Academy Awards (1965) – Winners and Nominees," *The Academy Awards*, accessed July 18, 2019, <https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1965>.

This film, along with the physical publications including materials from *The New York Times* and *Life* magazine, demonstrated that not only did the assassination and the publication of the Warren Report provide the possibility for revenue and recognition but that the American public still held interest in the memory of the president and his assassination. The formation and findings of the Warren Commission were designed to provide a definitive account of the president's assassination and to convict Oswald as the assassin in the court of public opinion. Despite the official explanation, Americans continued to discuss and relive the assassination and, as the nation continued to change in the mid-1960s from Kennedy's "New Frontier" into a bleaker, more uncertain future, the furor over the "who" and "what" of the shooting continued to grow.⁴³ In subsequent years, the efforts of the Warren Commission, and its defense by the government and the news media, transformed from noble pursuit of fact to belligerent suppression of truth.

Seeds of Suspicion

The hypothesis championed by the Warren Commission of a lone gunman as the assassin had gained the acceptance of nearly eighty-seven percent of the American population, yet private researchers challenged the assertion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. Although books and articles that focused on the conspiratorial aspects of the Kennedy Assassination did not enter the best seller lists until 1966, an abundance of earlier publications set the foundation and tone that conspiracists followed in the next three decades regarding the event and its effects on American politics and society.

One of the first articles to challenge the Dallas police and media assertion that Oswald acted alone became formative in the development and acceptance of conspiracy

⁴³ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 94-98.

theories involving the assassination of the president. In the days after Lee Harvey Oswald's murder by Jack Ruby in the basement of the Dallas Police Headquarters, Margarite Oswald contacted a New York defense attorney named Mark Lane. Although her son's death signaled an end to any criminal trial, Margarite Oswald felt her son was innocent of killing the president and hired Lane to represent Oswald before the Warren Commission. Lane possessed a sharp analytical wit and had a colorful career in law.⁴⁴ Lane had even met President Kennedy during his campaign for president in 1960.⁴⁵ In many ways, his investment in the tragedy of the president's death represented a pursuit for justice and for liberal causes.

Less than a month after the president's murder, Lane set directly to work. He penned an article for *The National Guardian*, a radical leftist newspaper, that became the first shot fired in the battle of the assassination narrative. Published on December 19, 1963, Lane's article, entitled "Oswald Innocent? – A Lawyer's Brief," represented Lane's criminal defense of Oswald. Lane asserted Oswald's innocence by challenging fifteen specific assertions made by Dallas law enforcement of Oswald's suspected guilt in shooting Kennedy and killing Dallas Police officer J.D. Tippit. The article dismissed most of the evidence against Oswald as strictly circumstantial or misleading. Lane criticized the Dallas Police Department's assertion that the assassination was a cinched case. He pointed out the unbelievability that the police and authorities had captured the alleged assassin less than two hours after the initial murder. Lane focused primarily on

⁴⁴ Anson, "They've Killed the President!", 71-72. Lane, a member of the New York State Assembly in 1961 and 1962, had notably participated in furthering several liberal and progressive causes. Lane argued against the death penalty and was arrested in 1961 for his participation as a "Freedom Rider" for African American equality.

⁴⁵ Mark Lane, *Last Word: My Indictment of the CIA in the Murder of JFK* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2011), 2-3.

the public claims made by Dallas District Attorney Henry Wade to television news cameras in the immediate aftermath of the president's death. Wade emphatically claimed that paraffin tests conducted on Oswald's cheek and hands showed he had fired a weapon on November 22, presumably the rifle that killed President Kennedy and the revolver that killed Officer Tippit. Lane attacked Wade's claims and conversely demonstrated that the paraffin tests suggested Oswald did not fire any weapon on the day of the assassination. According to Lane's article, the police's reliance on the testimonies of eyewitnesses who saw Oswald on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository was suspicious at best.⁴⁶ Many of these points formed the basis for later claims of conspiracy.

Perhaps Lane's most lasting contribution to the early formation of conspiracy thinking in the Kennedy assassination concerned his focus on Oswald's psychology and motive. To Lane, Oswald lacked any motive to harm the president. Lane characterized Oswald as a subject of misfortune, a man who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The New York attorney took seriously Oswald's claims of being a patsy. Lane continued to assail the presumption of Oswald's guilt, writing articles and establishing a "Citizens Committee of Inquiry" in response to the Warren Commission.⁴⁷

Lane's early articles represented a watershed in conspiracy thinking and established him as the first figurehead in a growing movement of distrust concerning the events of November 22, 1963. Lane's articles and outspoken public persona provided a foundation for future researchers and conspiracists. Coupled with the dismissal of official evidence linking Oswald to the crime as circumstantial or misleading, Lane made use of

⁴⁶ Mark Lane, "Oswald Innocent? – A Lawyer's Brief," *The National Guardian* 16, no. 11, December 19, 1963, accessed on July 18, 2019, <https://ratical.org/ratville/JFK/OI-ALB.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Anson, "*They've Killed the President!*", 72.

his training as a lawyer to interject the idea of reasonable doubt into the assassination narrative. This doubt about any degree of Oswald's involvement increased as more authors and researchers added more weight to conspiracy claims. The introduction of reasonable doubt into the Kennedy narrative ultimately allowed claims of conspiracy to survive and eventually thrive years after the president's death.

Although Mark Lane's *National Guardian* article and public attempts defending Oswald formed much of the groundwork for the conspiracy movement, most of the support doubting the single-assassin theory originated from outside the United States.⁴⁸ The societal atmosphere of mistrust had not yet formed. The idea of conspiracy in President Kennedy's assassination remained unpopular in American media. Despite public interest in the assassination, many American journalists and publishers balked at the idea of entertaining conspiracy theories. These journalists constructed a narrative that supported the official version of events.⁴⁹ Aside from Lane, foreign publishers and authors formed the vanguard that pushed the idea of conspiracy before the Warren Commission had concluded its investigation. Two of these conspiracist works typified the early trends and theories surrounding the president's death.

Published in early 1964 in Great Britain, Thomas G. Buchanan's *Who Killed Kennedy?* explored many of the same issues and questions that Mark Lane had posited in his *National Guardian* articles of late 1963. Buchanan believed Kennedy was assassinated by a small cabal of individuals. Buchanan wrote in *Who Killed Kennedy?* that this group consisted of at least eight different parties headed by a mysterious Texas

⁴⁸ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 77. For example, philosopher Bertrand Russell founded the "Who Killed Kennedy Committee" in Great Britain and wrote a scathing series of articles defending Oswald and criticizing the American press.

⁴⁹ Zelizer, *Covering the Body*, 104-105.

oil tycoon who he labeled “Mr. X.” Like Lane, he believed that the perpetrators of the crime most likely had been local right-wing radicals who opposed Kennedy’s progressive views toward civil rights and foreign affairs. Buchanan also believed another shooter had positioned himself in front of the presidential motorcade. He suggested that shots had been fired from the northwest corner of the Triple Underpass in Dealey Plaza.⁵⁰

Also following Lane’s earlier leads, Buchanan felt Oswald was innocent of the crime of killing President Kennedy and Officer J.D. Tippit. He believed Oswald had been railroaded by Dallas Police due to his connections to communism. Yet Buchanan also suggested that Oswald had been involved in the preparation and planning of the assassination. To Buchanan, the conspirators likely tasked Oswald with ordering the Italian-made Mannlicher Carcano rifle to a post office box under an alias and then transporting the rifle into the Texas School Book Depository Building for its use in the shooting.⁵¹ Otherwise, the scope of the conspiracy widened in this scenario. Not only had President Kennedy been a victim of the conspiracy, but so had Oswald, doomed to become its prime suspect.

As an author in the early conspiracist movement, Buchanan functioned much like Lane in furthering the theory of reasonable doubt. Buchanan focused on the probability that the assassination resulted from the actions of a group rather than an individual. By studying the history of American assassinations, Buchanan proposed a high probability of conspiracy. To Buchanan, the conspirators fooled the American people, who had a false sense of national security. At the time of the assassination, Americans respected the words of authorities. Americans were also more apt to believe that conspiracy and

⁵⁰ Thomas G. Buchanan, *Who Killed Kennedy?* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1964), 104-105, 186-192.

⁵¹ Buchanan, *Who Killed Kennedy?*, 15-16, 103.

assassinations could not occur in their own country.⁵² To Buchanan, the assassination exposed a naiveté in American thinking; one that allowed the true conspirators to remain at large.

Aside from Thomas Buchanan's *Who Killed Kennedy*, Joachim Joesten's *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?* (1964) created waves in how the American public perceived the mechanics of Kennedy's assassination. Although Buchanan's book pioneered several aspects of conspiracy thinking, Joesten's *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?* functioned as the archetype that most conspiracist literature and theory would follow. Joesten, a European journalist, openly admired the efforts of Mark Lane, who by the publication of Joesten's book had testified before the Warren Commission concerning lingering questions of conspiracy. Joesten credited Lane as creating the conversation of conspiracy regarding the Kennedy assassination and notes the works of others in exposing the plot and subsequent coverup that was protecting the real assassins.⁵³ Even in 1964, a grass-roots collaborative of individuals dedicated to the pursuit of truth regarding the assassination had begun to gel.

Joesten's *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?* introduced a multitude of theories and key points into the conspiracist narrative canon. Building from Buchanan's earlier claims of shots fired from in front of the president, Joesten argued that the shots originated from the vicinity of the Triple Underpass. Coupled with an assassin behind the president, a gunman near the Triple Underpass created a crossfire trajectory with the president in the center. He wrote that eyewitnesses saw a man run from the area in the immediate aftermath of the shooting. Joesten repeated Lane's observation that at least one Dallas

⁵² Buchanan, *Who Killed Kennedy?*, 24, 142-143.

⁵³ Joachim Joesten, *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?* (New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1964), 12-13.

motorcycle policeman ran up the grassy slope to this location in search of an assassin.⁵⁴ In later years, this area, dubbed the Grassy Knoll, became a haven for theoretical assassins hiding in the shadows.

Joesten also preyed upon the conflicts in reporting that inundated the media and authorities during the weekend of the assassination. He also directly targeted the investigative acumen and motives of the Dallas Police Department. Through his focus on Dallas police and media reports of the murder weapon allegedly recovered from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository Building, Joesten uncovered authorities had originally described the murder weapon as 7.65mm German Mauser; however, after Oswald's capture and identification, the assassin's rifle transformed into a 6.5mm Mannlicher Carcano that the Dallas police then linked to Oswald. Like Lane, Joesten also attacked statements made by Dallas District Attorney Henry Wade. Joesten specifically targeted Wade's statements about a map of Dallas recovered from a rooming house where Oswald stayed under an assumed name. While the police had reported the map represented Oswald's planned escape route after killing Kennedy, Joesten claimed Oswald most likely used the map while searching for employment. Not only did Joesten find Wade's comments misleading but felt that the Dallas Police and local authorities maintained a lynch mob mentality against Oswald.⁵⁵

To bolster his thesis of conspiracy, Joesten focused on other areas that few researchers had explored prior to the publication of *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy*. Joesten cited the interviews with the emergency personnel who attempted to save President Kennedy's life at Parkland Hospital. Joesten noted that several trained medical

⁵⁴ Joesten, *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?*, 97-98.

⁵⁵ Joesten, *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?*, 39, 41-43, 61-62, 77.

doctors claimed the wound to the front of the president's throat appeared to be a wound of entry. This scenario suggested that the wound to the president's throat originated in front of the presidential limousine and not from the sniper's nest of the Texas School Book Depository Building. Joesten also wrote that a witness saw a bullet hole in the windshield of the limousine. Joesten also questioned the widely publicized photographs of Oswald taken prior to the assassination that showed Oswald posing in his backyard apparently with the Mannlicher-Carcano rifle recovered from the Texas School Book Depository and the revolver that Oswald reportedly used to kill Officer J.D. Tippit. Joesten believed the photographs showed a different rifle than the one recovered by police.⁵⁶

Along with the questionable rifle in the backyard photographs, Joesten argued Oswald was framed for the murder of the president. Joesten noted that a person posing as Oswald may have been attempting to implicate him prior to the assassination. Although Oswald may have been involved in some capacity, the real plotters consisted of a diverse group of local and federal contingent. Differing from earlier works by Lane and Buchanan, Joesten accused the local Dallas police, the FBI, and the CIA of being part of a larger conspiracy.⁵⁷

At the time of its publication in 1964, *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?* offered a hopeful resolution to the truth behind the Kennedy assassination based on the efforts of the then-ongoing Warren Commission investigation. Joesten, along with other conspiracists, looked to the Warren Commission as a counterpoint to the alleged corruption of the Dallas Police and FBI investigation. The Warren Commission needed to

⁵⁶ Joesten, *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?*, 89-90, 93, 100-101.

⁵⁷ Joesten, *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?*, 11-12, 82-85.

present the evidence and allow the public to draw their own conclusions.⁵⁸ The conspiracists viewed the Warren Commission as redeemable prior to the publication of its report in September 1964. The conspiracy, whether domestic or international, remained exposable. Even at this point, the early critics who defended Oswald still demonstrated faith in the federal institutions that upheld the law, and these institutions would set the record straight on the Kennedy assassination. Justice would be done. To the early conspiracy theorists, the government could still be trusted with the moral obligation to present the whole truth to the American public.

A Changing America

Support for the lone assassin theory championed by the Warren Commission began faltering by 1965. The emotional weight of the assassination left a considerable mark on public consciousness. At the Democratic National Convention in 1964, Attorney General Robert Kennedy received a standing ovation that lasted over twenty minutes.⁵⁹ The energy and optimism of the Kennedy era evaporated as the nation began a descent into political and social upheaval. Following his election in 1964, President Johnson envisioned a “Great Society,” made up of social programs that would end poverty and continue American postwar economic prosperity. Although he attempted to continue liberal policies, many of Johnson’s efforts ultimately failed. Johnson’s social programs proved ineffective as the economy stalled, inflation rose, and racial inequality intensified.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Joesten, *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?*, 154-155.

⁵⁹ William L. O’Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s* (New York: Times Books, 1971), 116.

⁶⁰ O’Neill, *Coming Apart*, 130; James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 666.

By the mid-1960s, the Civil Rights Movement had also destabilized, and racial tensions began to boil over. President Johnson attempted to curb issues of racial inequality with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Regardless of political efforts, violence and radicalization continued to escalate. Widely televised images of civil rights activists being beaten by police officers in Selma, Alabama outraged millions of Americans. The assassination of prominent civil rights activist Malcolm X also contributed to feelings of hopelessness and frustration. The passive resistance championed by early practitioners of the Civil Rights Movement gave way to radicalism and anger.⁶¹ For five days in August 1965, rioters filled the streets of Watts, California, an African American neighborhood deeply affected by unemployment. The deadly rioting in Watts underlined widespread socio-economic and racial issues and acted as a prelude for further protests in the inner cities of 1960s America.⁶²

Although both economic and racial tensions sparked a lingering malaise of instability, the escalating military conflict in Vietnam provided the most significant contribution to growing governmental distrust. Fearing a communist takeover of Southeast Asia, the United States government had channeled economic and military support into South Vietnam since the late 1950s.⁶³ American military action in Southeast Asia expanded following the August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, a controversial naval engagement between a United States destroyer and North Vietnamese torpedo boats. Although the details of the incident were hazy, President Johnson used the event to gain

⁶¹ O'Neill, *Coming Apart*, 169-172; Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 448-449.

⁶² Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 588-589. The rioting caused the deaths of thirty-four people and over thirty-five million dollars in damages. Watts marked the first of three "long, hot summers" of tension and violence across the country.

⁶³ Robert J. McMahon, *The Cold War: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 99-101.

congressional support for continued military action.⁶⁴ In his book, *The Cold War: A Very Short Introduction*, Robert J. McMahon writes that “[b]etween 1965 and 1968, the Johnson Administration poured resources and men into South Vietnam in a fruitless effort to crush a popular insurgency while trying simultaneously to prop up a succession of unpopular and ineffectual governments in Saigon.”⁶⁵ Despite this reality, the Johnson administration continued to assure the public that the Vietnam conflict would not spiral out of control despite increased bombings and troop deployment.⁶⁶

Although President Johnson had embraced a platform of peace when elected, he continued to escalate American involvement in Southeast Asia, creating a “credibility gap” between the government and the American people.⁶⁷ By July 1965, nearly two hundred thousand American soldiers and military personnel were engaged in the Vietnam conflict.⁶⁸ Domestic opposition to the war, often manifesting itself in the form of college anti-war protests, gained in popularity as body counts mounted and the North Liberation Front (NLF) refused to surrender.⁶⁹ Many of these college-based protests, labeled “teach-ins,” unified both students and college professors under a common banner of anti-war sentiment and intensified government distrust. According to author William L. O’Neill, the “teach-ins made dissent respectable.”⁷⁰

The political and social changes of the 1960s created a tense era of instability and misgiving. Postwar prosperity was giving way to uncertainty, cynicism, and dread. The

⁶⁴ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 602-604.

⁶⁵ McMahon, *The Cold War*, 103.

⁶⁶ O’Neill, *Coming Apart*, 137.

⁶⁷ O’Neill, *Coming Apart*, 120.

⁶⁸ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 613-614. An additional three hundred thousand men would be drafted into the armed services by 1968.

⁶⁹ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 598-599.

⁷⁰ O’Neill, *Coming Apart*, 143.

Warren Commission became a target of suspicion as the credibility gap continued to widen.⁷¹ Some Americans even began looking back to the Kennedy assassination as the root of the country's downward spiral.⁷² As the American public began to seriously doubt the federal government, the official narrative of President Kennedy's assassination came under intense fire.

The Initial Wave of Warren Report Criticism

As the cultural center of the nation began to give way by the mid-1960s, initial critical optimism toward the Warren Commission's investigation faded. The Warren Commission's refutation of conspiracy angered those critical of the official narrative. The language of the report seemed both dense and careless toward a nation still grieving the president's death. The lack of motive behind Oswald's actions raised more uncertainty. Although conspiracy theorists still utilized media reports and interviews that had been available prior to the publication of the report, most of the critics to the official version of events turned their criticism toward the Warren Commission itself. The publication of the *Warren Report* presented the conspiracists with an officially rubber-stamped narrative to scrutinize and peck apart.⁷³ Many of the conspiracy theorists immediately recognized that the commission's evidence relied on the single-bullet theory and focused their efforts on its apparent implausibility.⁷⁴ Other conspiracy advocates attacked the media's defense of the commission's report.⁷⁵ The Warren Commission inadvertently provided conspiracists with a template from which to work. This allowed conspiracy theorists to construct and

⁷¹ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 253-254.

⁷² Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 98.

⁷³ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 113-115.

⁷⁴ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 80-82.

⁷⁵ Zelizer, *Covering the Body*, 107-108.

validate their own version of the assassination by exposing the apparent contradictions and omissions within the commission's report.

Instead of quelling rumors of a conspiracy, the report and its ancillary volumes of materials provided critics with ample materials to deconstruct and analyze. Many of the early critics noted inconsistencies and distortions within the report. To the critics, the Warren Commission either failed to explain the assassination in its entirety or ignored the evidence that threatened or weakened its central thesis. Instead of focusing on inconsistent reporting or contradictory statements by eyewitnesses, commission critics and conspiracists based many of their arguments on the failures of the report and its volumes of testimony and ballistics tests. Essentially, the obsessive fervor of the conspiracists and the publication and fanfare surrounding the Warren Commission Report renewed the fire of uncertainty that the official investigation sought to extinguish.

In the wake of the Warren Commission, a new band of conspiracist researchers, following in the footsteps of integral works by Lane, Buchanan, and Joesten, published a variety of books and made appearances on talk radio shows and television. This early vanguard of Warren Commission critique constituted more than lawyers and journalists. Instead, some of the most vocal detractors of the official investigation included academics, former senate investigators, and even housewives, who all challenged the official explanation that Oswald had acted alone.⁷⁶ Their efforts, all published in 1965 and 1966, seriously damaged the integrity of the commission's investigation in the eyes

⁷⁶ For a few notable examples, Josiah Thompson, author of 1967's *Six Seconds in Dallas*, was a college professor. Harold Weisberg, who wrote *Whitewash* in 1965, and Sylvia Meagher, author of 1967's *Accessories After the Fact*, worked for both national and international organizations. Mary Farrell, a secretary and housewife from Dallas, devoted the remainder of her life to assassination studies and amassed thousands of files for researchers.

of the American public and made conspiracy synonymous with the Kennedy assassination.⁷⁷

Although early detractors to the Warren Commission Report existed shortly after its publication in September 1964, *Whitewash: The Report on the Warren Report* (1965) by Harold Weisberg set the basic template the critics of the Warren Report would follow. Weisberg was no stranger to Washington D.C. politics. Prior to the publication of *Whitewash*, he worked as a senate investigator in the 1940s and 1950s. The official explanation of President Kennedy's assassination never sat well with Weisberg and the publishing of the commission's report provided him the means to study the commission's evidence. The inconsistencies and issues Weisberg found in the report motivated him to write *Whitewash*.⁷⁸ He had trouble finding a publisher for his controversial work, so Weisberg eventually decided to self-publish his work using his own meager finances.⁷⁹ Weisberg believed the truth behind Kennedy's murder and the failure of the Warren Report should be available to the general public. Despite its humble beginnings, Weisberg's *Whitewash* proved a seminal work in the conspiracy narrative. By focusing on both the motivations of the commission and deconstructing the assertions and evidence the commission utilized, Weisberg created an influential work that cemented the idea of conspiracy surrounding President Kennedy's murder.

In *Whitewash*, Weisberg attempted to demonstrate that the official investigation's verdict had been compromised by political obligations. The upper echelon of the commission's hierarchy consisted of several prominent members of the United States

⁷⁷ John Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation: The Assassination of John F. Kennedy and the First Generation Critics of the Warren Report* (San Antonio: Wings Press, 2007), 9-12.

⁷⁸ Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 43-44.

⁷⁹ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 181-182.

government, and Weisberg believed that President Johnson had tasked those men to maintain order and provide an explanation that denied any government involvement. To the author of *Whitewash*, the commission members and its investigators concentrated their efforts more on preserving bureaucracy than on presenting the truth.⁸⁰ According to the book, the United States intelligence communities used Oswald as an agent and as a pawn in the assassination. Weisberg felt that Oswald had been hand-selected by either the FBI or the CIA while still in the United States Marine Corps, and that his defection to the USSR in the early 1960s had been orchestrated by the United States government.⁸¹ In the version of events detailed in *Whitewash*, Oswald represented more than a hapless victim: he was an unwitting government agent caught in the web of an ever-growing conspiracy.

Aside from his speculation concerning the motivations of the commission, Weisberg utilized *Whitewash* as a vehicle to detail the inconsistencies and fragility of the report. He noted that all evidence in *Whitewash* came from the Warren Report's materials.⁸² Weisberg emphasized the commission's reliance on the single-bullet theory. He attacked the commission's vague language about the hypothesis. The single-bullet theory represented the weakest link in the commission's lone assassin theory.⁸³

Weisberg's critique of the single-bullet theory essentially turned the commission's own evidence against itself. Weisberg utilized the physical and medical evidence contained within the commission's volumes in an attempt to dismantle and destroy the single-bullet theory. Weisberg noted that the commission's own ballistics

⁸⁰ Harold Weisberg, introduction to *Whitewash: The Report on the Warren Report* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 1965), x-xi, xi.

⁸¹ Weisberg, *Whitewash*, 123-125.

⁸² Weisberg, introduction to *Whitewash*, xiii.

⁸³ Weisberg, *Whitewash*, 156.

experts could not recreate Oswald's alleged shooting feat. The commission's single-bullet theory asserted the bullet that hit Texas Governor John Connally passed through President Kennedy's back and neck. However, Weisberg found this explanation improbable. According to his account, at the autopsy at Bethesda Naval Hospital in Washington D.C. on the night of November 22, 1963, the pathologists who performed the post-mortem examination on President Kennedy were initially unaware of a tracheotomy performed at Parkland Hospital in Dallas and were unable to probe both the president's back and throat wounds. Coupled with anatomical measurements that placed the president's wound nearly six inches down his spine, the bullet which impacted the president's back either did not exit or travelled at an extreme upward trajectory.⁸⁴

Aside from the seemingly improbable wound trajectory through President Kennedy's body, Weisberg noted other evidence that seemingly contradicted the single-bullet theory. Weisberg echoed earlier critics in believing Governor Connally's statements to the Warren Commission that he had been hit by a shot separate from the president. The condition of Commission Exhibit 399, or the bullet recovered from a stretcher at Parkland Hospital, constituted other problems. Weisberg questioned that the round in the commission's evidence, CE 399, was responsible for the wounds to either President Kennedy or Governor Connally. He noted that the doctors who performed surgery on Connally also questioned this.⁸⁵

Aside from shifting the focus of conspiracy theorists to the apparent weaknesses of the commission's single-bullet theory, Weisberg's *Whitewash* also shifted the focus of opposition of the Warren Report toward the photographic evidence of the assassination.

⁸⁴ Weisberg, *Whitewash*, 155-156, 178-181.

⁸⁵ Weisberg, *Whitewash*, 172-175.

Much like the commission, Weisberg recognized the importance of the Zapruder film in deciphering the events of the assassination. *Life* magazine limited the exposure of the Zapruder film from the time it was purchased on the weekend of the assassination.⁸⁶ Aside from appearances as still images in a handful of editions of *Life* magazine, researchers had but two other means to access the film. The Warren Commission published the nearly five-hundred individual frames of the Zapruder film in one of its supplementary volumes. However, the slides differed from the original in that they were black and white instead of color. Some assassination researchers resorted to cutting apart the volume containing the Zapruder frames and reassembling them into crude, makeshift flipbooks.⁸⁷ Following its investigation, the Warren Commission deposited a copy of the film at the National Archives along with other materials, including the alleged assassin's rifle and President Kennedy's brain and tissue slides. Weisberg and other researchers devoted a considerable amount of scrutiny to the slides of the Zapruder film and the evidence contained within its images.

From studying the Zapruder film, Weisberg made several claims concerning the film and the commission's use of it. Weisberg sided with many of the critics and the initial observations by the FBI and commission investigators that President Kennedy and Governor Connally had been wounded at separate times.⁸⁸ Aside from the content recorded on the frames, he also focused on the physical condition of Zapruder's camera and the 8mm film that he used when he inadvertently captured President Kennedy's murder. Weisberg noted the copy of the film in the National Archives had been damaged.

⁸⁶ Richard J.H. Johnston, "Movie Amateur Filmed Attack; Sequence is Sold to Magazine," *The New York Times*, November 24, 1963, 5.

⁸⁷ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 178-180.

⁸⁸ Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 202.

Several frames had been spliced and removed from the film around the time that the presidential limousine disappeared from Zapruder's view behind the Stemmon's Freeway sign; the point where the commission believed the single-bullet theory occurred.⁸⁹ Later investigation revealed the frames from the camera original had been accidentally damaged by a *Life* magazine photo technician. Taking incentive from this revelation, Weisberg challenged the FBI mechanical study of Zapruder's 8mm home movie camera. The FBI laboratory reported that Zapruder's Bell & Howell 8mm camera recorded the president's assassination at a speed of 18.3 frames per second. However, Weisberg presented evidence that Zapruder's camera may have recorded the assassination at a greater speed, as much as 24 frames per second. If the accusations that Zapruder's camera ran at a higher frame rate were correct, then the commission's six-second shooting scenario would be incorrect, and Oswald would have been unable to fire three shots in the allotted amount of time necessary to support the lone gunman hypothesis.⁹⁰

While *Whitewash* may have provided Warren Commission critics plenty of information to ponder, other publications in 1965 expanded the conspiracy movement further toward paranoia. While conspiracists, such as Weisberg, asserted that the Warren Commission covered up specific aspects of the assassination, they were less apt to believe the Warren Commission and its members were directly involved in the planning or execution of President Kennedy's assassination. Instead, the Warren Commission members were simply victims themselves, forced to protect political sensibilities and bureaucratic protocol. However, not all the critics shared this perception of the Warren Commission's investigation and of the government's involvement. Some Warren

⁸⁹ Weisberg, *Whitewash*, 45.

⁹⁰ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 159, 183-184.

Commission critics, such as Penn Jones Jr., believed the conspiracy did not end in Dallas. Instead, a group of unseen conspirators continued to mislead the general public and to claim more victims. The continued existence of the conspiracy became necessary to tie up loose ends in unpleasant and nefarious ways.

Even prior to 1965, Penn Jones Jr. had made a name for himself in the budding Kennedy assassination conspiracy movement. In the first half of his life, Jones aspired to be a lawyer. He attended the University of Texas at Austin where met future Texas Governor John Connally and future Dallas District Attorney Henry Wade. At the time of the assassination, Jones served as owner and chief editor of the *Midlothian Mirror* in Midlothian, Texas which he had purchased in the mid-1940s after returning from service in the Second World War. Jones's reputation as a hard-hitting, truth-seeking journalist earned him the Elijah Parish Lovejoy Award for Courage in Journalism the same year that President Kennedy was assassinated.⁹¹ Following the release of the Warren Commission Report, Jones shifted most of his journalistic focus to studying the assassination and wrote articles about the conspiratorial nature of the shooting by 1965.⁹² Ownership of *The Midlothian Mirror* aided Jones in disseminating his theories on what happened in Dallas on November 22, 1963. There were no editors to refuse to publish or distribute Penn's version of the assassination.

The fruits of Penn Jones Jr.'s research into the assassination culminated in the publication of *Forgive My Grief* (1966), which would be followed over the next decade by three additional volumes. Aside from a belief in multiple shooters present in Dealey Plaza when President Kennedy was shot, Jones believed that many key witnesses to the

⁹¹ Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 103-108.

⁹² Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 110-112.

assassination and the events surrounding the assassination died under mysterious circumstances. In *Forgive My Grief*, Jones argued that the apparent circumstantial deaths were the result of the conspirators attempting to silence witnesses who stood opposed to the official narrative that Oswald acted alone.⁹³ Jones felt he had exposed a disturbing pattern of misfortune, extortion, and murder that plagued witnesses whose testimonies disagreed with the commission's official narrative. Jones predicted "that more killings are going to be necessary in order to keep this crime quiet."⁹⁴ Works such as *Forgive My Grief* added a new dimension of paranoia to the conspiracy theories. According to believers, the conspirators monitored and eliminated issues that indicated their existence until no loose end remained.⁹⁵

Despite Jones's claims that many eyewitnesses had been killed by conspirators still active after Kennedy's assassination, many of his assertions could be easily dismissed or proven as circumstantial. For instance, one of the first "mysterious" deaths that Jones focused on was Earlene Roberts in January 1966. Roberts told assassination investigators that a Dallas police car pulled up outside Oswald's boarding house as if to pick up Oswald around 1:00 PM CST on November 22, 1963.⁹⁶ However, Roberts died of heart failure.⁹⁷ Jones also cited the death of Lee Bowers, a railroad tower operator who had witnessed strange activity behind the Grassy Knoll on the day of the president's

⁹³ Penn Jones, Jr., *Forgive My Grief: A Critical Review of the Warren Commission Report on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* (Midlothian: The Midlothian Mirror Inc., 1966), 2, 8; Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 313-316.

⁹⁴ Jones, Jr., *Forgive My Greif*, 185. Jones attributed the murderous actions of the conspirators as the works of "bribe takers, punks, pimps, homosexuals, perverts, and cheap gamblers."

⁹⁵ John McAdams, *JFK Assassination Logic: How to Think About Claims of Conspiracy* (Potomac Books, 2011), 98; Gerald Posner, *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 489.

⁹⁶ Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 111.

⁹⁷ Posner, *Case Closed*, 493.

assassination. Bowers had been killed in an automobile accident near Midlothian, Texas. Jones interviewed a doctor claiming Bowers acted like he was drugged or disoriented before he died.⁹⁸ However, Bower's death most likely resulted the trauma from the car accident itself.⁹⁹ Domingo Benavides, a witness to the Officer Tippit slaying, claimed he received death threats and that his brother was shot and killed in a case of mistaken identity. Benavides' testimony to the Warren Commission and to researchers indicated nothing that suggested an anomaly to the official narrative.¹⁰⁰ Not all of the witnesses whose testimonies suggested conspiracy received death threats or were victims of unfortunate circumstances. Regardless, Jones's efforts in assassination research provided an early glimpse into the building paranoia that would eventually envelope most of the conspiracy theories, and the theorists themselves.¹⁰¹ Other conspiracists continued Jones's research on the mysterious deaths and threats toward assassination witnesses. In *Forgive My Grief*, Jones pinpointed thirteen witness deaths as mysterious.¹⁰² By the 1980s, this number ballooned to over one hundred.¹⁰³

While the efforts of both Harold Weisberg and Penn Jones Jr. added to the growing discord and helped solidify attacks on the Warren Report, the conspiracists' most significant breakthrough into mainstream American thinking occurred with the movement's primary originator. In the years following his pioneering series of articles in *The National Guardian*, Mark Lane continued to rally support behind his cause that

⁹⁸ Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 316.

⁹⁹ Posner, *Case Closed*, 501.

¹⁰⁰ John McAdams, "The Not-So-Mysterious Death of Eddie Benavides," *The Kennedy Assassination*, accessed July 18, 2019, <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/home.htm>; Posner, *Case Closed*, 500.

¹⁰¹ Jones later followed up *Forgive My Grief* with three additional volumes. Jones published the final volume in 1974.

¹⁰² Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 317.

¹⁰³ Posner, *Case Closed*, 498.

President Kennedy had been killed as the result of a conspiracy. Lane debated Warren Commission attorney Eugene Ball in a highly publicized meeting in Beverly Hills, California in which Lane wowed an audience with his encyclopedic knowledge of the assassination.¹⁰⁴ He undertook an extensive lecture tour and spoke to younger audiences at college campuses. Lane also made appearances on national radio and television. Conservative pundit William F. Buckley, Jr. hosted Lane on his popular television talk show *Firing Line* on December 1, 1966. Buckley, a supporter of the Warren Commission's version of the assassination, debated Lane in an hour-long segment in which Lane firmly held his intellectual ground.¹⁰⁵ These speaking and media appearances catapulted Lane to near-celebrity status amongst the early Warren Commission critics. Lane's work helped spread conspiracy ideology into intellectual and popular circles beyond the confines of a grass-roots movement of private individuals. The constant assault by Lane and others on the media's reliance on the Warren Report narrative also legitimized the critics as moral truth-seekers.¹⁰⁶

Lane's groundbreaking work and consistent media exposure led to the publication of his magnum opus in 1966. Entitled *Rush to Judgment*, the nearly four-hundred-page tome catapulted to the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list and remained there for over six months.¹⁰⁷ The book added to Lane's fame and fortune, allowing him more appearances in popular media that brought conspiracy ideology into the homes of millions of Americans. Although controversial, the book signified a change in public

¹⁰⁴ Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 186-200.

¹⁰⁵ *Firing Line with William F. Buckley Jr.: The Warren Commission: Fact or Fiction?*, directed by Al DeCaprio (December 1, 1966; New York: WOR-TV, 2008), DVD.

¹⁰⁶ Zelizer, *Covering the Body*, 108.

¹⁰⁷ Anson, "They've Killed the President!", 74.

perception. Coupled with previous literature, the success of *Rush to Judgment* inspired figures in the media and journalism community to voice their own doubts.¹⁰⁸ Lane's book signified that the conspiracy movement had not only matured but was here to stay in Americans' collective consciousness.

While the cultural significance of *Rush to Judgment* turned the President's assassination into a much talked about subject, the contents of Lane's book featured many of the same points that had been featured in earlier works by other conspiracy authors. Lane may have been one of the architects of the conspiracy movement but *Rush to Judgment* functioned as a compendium of conspiracy ideology and evidence in 1966. In many ways, Lane built from the framework first put forth by Joachim Joesten's *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?* (1964). Lane's initial articles for *The National Guardian* argued more for Oswald's innocence than with the mechanics of the assassination itself. *Rush to Judgment* proved no different than Lane's earlier work. Lane attacked the inconsistencies in the Warren Commission's case but neglected to expand more on the parties responsible for Kennedy's murder other than vague accusations.¹⁰⁹

Lane recycled many of the points that Joesten had written about in 1964. This new hypothesis included Lane's confirmation of the Grassy Knoll assassin positioned in front of the presidential motorcade. Instead of simply suggesting shots originated from other locations in Dealey Plaza, Lane definitively stated that an assassin fired from the cover of the picket fence near the park's North Pergola. Lane cited the testimony of several railroad workers who had viewed the presidential motorcade from the top of the Triple Underpass in Dealey Plaza. Several of these witnesses, including a railroad

¹⁰⁸ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 120-121.

¹⁰⁹ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 78-79.

foreman named Sam “Skinny” Holland, not only claimed they heard shots from the area of the Grassy Knoll but also witnessed a puff of smoke originating from the area near the picket fence in between the North Pergola and the Triple Underpass. Coupled with the ear-witnesses who reported shots from the general vicinity, Lane felt that this was convincing evidence of a second shooter.¹¹⁰

Much like Joesten’s *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy*, Lane’s *Rush to Judgment* also expanded on Oswald’s role in the conspiracy. Lane continued several of the points he had made in earlier articles and appearances arguing for Oswald’s innocence. Much like Joesten, Lane attempted to demonstrate Oswald had been the victim of a frame-up and that elements of the local Dallas Police force had actively helped to convince the public that Oswald was the lone assassin. The Dallas police and local authorities also framed Oswald for the murder of one of its own, Officer J.D. Tippit. Lane also added to the work of Harold Weisberg by taking the photographic evidence into account. Lane cited a photograph taken by Associated Press photographer James “Ike” Altgens during the assassination as showing Oswald viewing the presidential motorcade from the front steps of the Texas School Book Depository. If this figure was indeed Oswald, then the commission’s assertion that Oswald was the sixth-floor assassin would be destroyed.¹¹¹

The most significant contribution Lane made in *Rush to Judgment* involved the complete condemnation of the Warren Report and its contents. Lane accused the Warren Commission Report of being little more than a prosecutor’s brief masquerading as fact. Instead of reaching a logical conclusion based on study of the evidence, the commission

¹¹⁰ Mark Lane, *Rush to Judgment: A Critique of the Warren Commission’s Inquiry into the Murders of President John F. Kennedy, Officer J.D. Tippit and Lee Harvey Oswald* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston, 1966), 33-39.

¹¹¹ Lane, *Rush to Judgment*, 353-356.

merely fit the evidence to match their theory of a lone gunman. Lane felt the commission had deliberately worked backward from Oswald as the assassin. The implications raised by the book suggested the Warren Commission acted simply as an instrument meant to conceal the truth, not expose it.¹¹²

Throughout 1966, the assault on the Warren Commission continued. However, the next wave of attacks came from an increasingly diverse and expanding conspiracy researcher community. Two works published in 1966 that extended the intrigue around the president's killing demonstrated the debate was not limited to a solely male or middle-aged demographic. The assassination and the questions around it effected many Americans of all ages and creeds. The growing popularity attracted a wider audience of participants. Published in 1966, Edward J. Epstein's *Inquest* and Sylvia Meagher's *Subject Index to the Warren Report and Hearings and Exhibits* became two invaluable resources to the furtherment of conspiracy research.

Unlike his contemporaries, Edward J. Epstein's entry into the Kennedy assassination conspiracy debate originated outside of sole personal interest. Epstein, a graduate student in American government at Cornell University, decided to write his master's thesis about truth in government. Looking at current affairs and remembering the assassination, Epstein decided to write his master's thesis over the Warren Commission investigation.¹¹³ His efforts produced the 1966 book *Inquest* which immediately shot to the top of the bestseller list and received considerable critical attention.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Lane, *Rush to Judgment*, 378, 381, 398.

¹¹³ Edward J. Epstein, introduction to *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth* (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), xviii.

¹¹⁴ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 120.

Epstein's *Inquest* characterized the Warren Commission as a chaotic and conflicted investigation. Epstein procured interviews with key members of the Warren Commission's staff. His status as a student writing his master's thesis on political truth allowed him access to the commission's lawyers, and even some of the commissioners themselves, who did not suspect Epstein harbored conspiratorial theories regarding the assassination.¹¹⁵ Epstein argued that the commission's investigation had been the victim of serious time constraints. The junior counsel of the commission shouldered most of the workload. Regarding this situation, Epstein wrote "it would be reasonable to expect that accounts containing major contradictions might be disregarded without further investigation."¹¹⁶ The sheer volume of the evidence adversely affected the commission's research and conclusions.

Epstein also claimed that parts of the report were significantly rewritten despite conflicting opinions on the mechanics of the assassination. Several of the commission's lawyers expressed dissatisfaction with the report's chapter concerning Oswald's actions on the day of the assassination. Significant portions of the chapter were rewritten to include witnesses that some of the commission's investigators felt were unreliable. Epstein cited a scathing twenty-six-page memorandum written by Warren Commission attorney Wesley Liebler that challenged the commission's statements concerning Oswald's marksmanship and transport of the rifle into the Texas School Book Depository Building.¹¹⁷ Through personal interviews and a scrutiny of the commission's materials,

¹¹⁵ Anson, "They've Killed the President!", 74; Philip Shenon, *A Cruel and Shocking Act: The Secret History of the Kennedy Assassination* (Henry Holt & Company, 2013), 498-500.

¹¹⁶ Epstein, *Inquest*, 65-67, 70.

¹¹⁷ Epstein, *Inquest*, 133-147. According to Epstein, the commission's writers added the account of Helen Markham, an eyewitness to the murder of Dallas police officer J.D. Tippit, who identified Oswald as the murderer. Contrary to the medical evidence indicating that Tippit's wounds were instantly fatal,

Epstein demonstrated that the commission disagreed about many of the central findings that made their way into the finished report.

Perhaps Epstein's most important contribution to the growing conspiracy movement involved his comparison of the FBI investigation to that of the Warren Commission Report. Epstein's cordial relationship with commission lawyers allowed him access to documents the public had not seen including FBI reports and memos concerning the assassination.¹¹⁸ Communication between the commission and the bureau had been strained, even contemptuous.¹¹⁹ In his interviews, he found that commission staff felt the FBI's investigation was inept and incompetent. Epstein discovered that there were significant differences in the commission's version of the assassination versus the FBI.

Appearing to the public for the first time in *Inquest*, the FBI Summary Report of the assassination opposed the commission's single-bullet theory. According to the FBI Report, the bullet which struck the president in the back did not exit the president's body. In fact, the FBI Report appeared to match the president's official autopsy report. To Epstein, this demonstrated the commission had willfully disregarded both reports in order to pursue the single-bullet theory. The direction and trajectory of the shots involved in the commission's construction of the single-bullet theory also did not match the FBI report. The FBI summary report indicated that the bullet holes in President Kennedy's clothing matched the autopsy report. If true, the commission's single bullet would have to travel at an extreme upward trajectory to exit the front of the president's throat. Otherwise, this

Markham "claimed to have spoken to Tippit while waiting for the ambulance." Commission attorney Joseph Ball initially deemed Markham's testimony as "utterly unreliable."

¹¹⁸ Shenon, *A Cruel and Shocking Act*, 499-500.

¹¹⁹ Epstein, *Inquest*, 95.

trajectory stood at odds with the reported sniper's nest some six floors above Elm Street and the presidential motorcade.¹²⁰

Epstein also attacked the commission's *raison d'être*. In *Inquest*, he openly criticized the commission for masquerading as an entity of truth. To Epstein, the commission only kept the appearance of a truth-seeking commission but in fact acted only to downplay conspiracy claims. It was not the commission's job to investigate but to suppress rampant rumors that hurt the lone-gunman hypothesis supported by the federal government. Epstein criticized the commission for ignoring physical evidence and eyewitness testimonies that challenged the single-bullet theory. In Epstein's opinion, the commission only validated their own version of events.¹²¹

While *Inquest* damaged the structure and motivation of the Warren Commission, the year 1966 also saw the publication of the first major reference work in the assassination. Sylvia Meagher published *Subject Index to the Warren Report and Hearings and Exhibits* (1966). Prior to her entry into the annals of assassination literature, Meagher worked at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. An active supporter of liberal causes throughout her life, Meagher's interest in the Kennedy Assassination began almost immediately after she heard the news of the shooting. From the beginning, Meagher doubted that Oswald had acted alone or at all. She maintained an active interest in the assassination after 1963 by attending Mark Lane's lectures and ordering all twenty-six volumes of the Warren Commission Report.¹²²

¹²⁰ Epstein, *Inquest*, 47-49, 51-58.

¹²¹ Epstein, *Inquest*, 41, 75-83, 154. Epstein writes that, "...while known facts were substantiated, unknown facts were left unknown." Epstein's "unknown facts," including an alleged bullet-strike to a curb on Elm Street, are far from definitive. Instead, they raise a series of provocative questions and inconsistencies that merely suggest other possible alternatives.

¹²² Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 146-147.

Upon receiving her copies of the commission report and its supplemental volumes, Meagher discovered a glaring issue with the commission's published materials. She noticed that the report lacked a proper index by which researchers could cross-reference subjects and documents contained within the commission's printed works. Although the commission's verdict represented the government's definitive account on the assassination, the commission neglected to give the general public a tool by which to check its extensive investigative work. Working from her home, Meagher spent nearly an entire year painstakingly creating an index for the Warren Commission. Fearful of damaging her professional career with the World Health Organization, Meagher also secretly worked on a manuscript of her own assassination research.¹²³

Meagher's *Subject Index to the Warren Report and Hearings and Exhibits* eventually reached publication in March 1966.¹²⁴ Meagher's efforts encapsulated a valuable resource to both contemporary critics and future students of the assassination. Meagher's text seemed to indicate that the Warren Commission Report was loaded with errors, distortions, and omissions. However, Meagher's efforts were colored by her own biases. In some places, her index neglected to quote evidence in the report that implicated Oswald in the crime.¹²⁵ Regardless, Meagher's *Subject Index to the Warren Report* aroused intense interest from both sides of the debate. The FBI received at least three copies of Meagher's book.¹²⁶ Meagher's reference work functioned as a Rosetta Stone that opened the flood gates to further scrutiny of the official lone-assassin theory.

¹²³ Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 145, 237-238, 249.

¹²⁴ Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 281; Sylvia Meagher, *Subject Index to the Warren Report and Hearings and Exhibits* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1966).

¹²⁵ Posner, *Case Closed*, 416-417.

¹²⁶ Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 282.

Meagher's *Subject Index to the Warren Report* quickly became a weapon to Warren Commission critics who no longer had to dig through thousands of pages of documents to find information.

By the middle of the 1960s, the American public's perception and understanding of the assassination had radically changed. Amid the tensions present in America's cultural landscape, a Gallup poll conducted in late 1966 demonstrated nearly two-thirds of the American population believed that President Kennedy's death had been the result of a conspiracy.¹²⁷ Just two years earlier, eighty-seven percent denied that very fact. As the turmoil of the 1960s increased and Warren Commission critics continued to publicly assault the official narrative of the assassination, the American public reverted back to its initial doubt over the Kennedy Assassination before the Warren Commission investigation.

The efforts and persistence of the Warren Commission critics in dismantling the official narrative of President Kennedy's assassination were also conjoined with the apparent drastic changes in America's political and social makeup since 1963. Growing American entanglement in Vietnam, pressing social issues such as the Civil Rights Movement, and nostalgia toward the slain president altered American's perceptions of their government. Instead of external enemies, such as had been seen in the 1950s during the Red Scare, internal conspiracies became a more viable explanation for the apparent downturn of American progress.¹²⁸ The years that followed further damaged the integrity of the Warren Report and the institutions that it represented.

¹²⁷ George H. Gallup, "Do you think one man was responsible for the assassination of President Kennedy, or do you think others were involved?," December 8-13, 1966, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935-1971*, vol. 3, 1959-1971 (New York: Random House, 1972), 2044.

¹²⁸ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 94-98.

The High-Water Mark

Whispers of conspiracy in the assassination extended beyond the grass-roots movement that had opposed the lone-gunman explanation championed by the federal government. Books continued to flood the market aimed at exposing the apparent “truth” the federal government had either ignored or intentionally hid from the general public. However, the discussion of the truth surrounding the assassination seeped into mainstream media discussion on a national level and allowed conspiracy theories to reach a wider audience of Americans.¹²⁹ Although there was an influx of materials published about the assassination in 1967, two books helped cement the conspiracy movement further and produced some of its most academic and intensive work.

In 1967, following the success of her *Subject Index to the Warren Report*, Sylvia Meagher completed her manuscript. Meagher moved from reference work to obsessive microstudy of the commission’s contradictions and omissions within its files.¹³⁰ Entitled *Accessories After the Fact: The Warren Commission, the Authorities, & the Report on the JFK Assassination*, Meagher’s magnum-opus on the assassination built a case against the Warren Commission that picked at every minute intricacy and contradiction in the report. Meagher utilized *Accessories After the Fact* as a means of using the commission’s own evidence against itself. The book represents an important amalgam of prominent assassination conspiracy theories that had appeared in the middle and latter half of the 1960s.

Meagher attacked the commission’s apparent ignorance of key evidence. Meagher focused on witnesses that the commission chose to ignore. She cited several of the closest

¹²⁹ Anson, “*They’ve Killed the President!*”, 74; Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 120-121.

¹³⁰ Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 149-150.

witnesses to the president at the time of the shooting as having heard shots from the Grassy Knoll. Although part of the commission files, these testimonies were ignored. Meagher also points out the commission's reliance on seemingly incorrect or faulty forensic evidence. She described the shooting tests conducted by the commission and how none of the participants could recreate Oswald's alleged marksmanship. She also criticized the commission's attempts at tying the alleged assassin's rifle to Oswald. *Accessories After the Fact* derided the commission for accusing Oswald of the crime when they could deliver no motive for his actions.¹³¹ To Meagher, the slipshod methods of investigation coupled with what she perceived as deliberate deception made the Warren Commission an insult to justice and the American people. A reinvestigation of the evidence to restore order became paramount.¹³²

Upon its publications, *Accessories After the Fact* sold remarkably well and generated much controversy. Conspiracy theorists viewed Meagher's work as a breakthrough. She successfully melded the often-confusing theories of several leaders of the conspiracy movement into a more palpable form. By demonstrating the flaws in the commission's investigation, Meagher strengthened the argument that a proper reinvestigation was necessary to establish the truth. However, *Accessories After the Fact* generated much criticism from media review outlets who supported the government narrative that the assassination reflected the actions of one disturbed individual. While some recognized the amount of research and analysis that Meagher poured into her book, other critics found her work to be dry, obsessive, and unrealistically paranoid in its

¹³¹ Sylvia Meagher, *Accessories After the Fact: The Warren Commission, the Authorities & the Report on the JFK Assassination* (New York: MJF Books, 1967), 15-20, 49-50, 106-110, 242.

¹³² Meagher, introduction to *Accessories After the Fact*, xxviii-xxx.

accusations of involvement of everyone from the Cubans to Jack Ruby.¹³³ This “paranoia” that critics found in Meagher’s book reflected a growing phenomenon of distrust and suspicion.

Following the landmark publication of *Accessories After the Fact*, a book published by a Haverford College professor in 1967 also revolutionized the Kennedy Assassination conspiracy movement. Josiah Thompson, a professor of philosophy, wrote several articles about the assassination which later became the basis for his book entitled *Six Seconds in Dallas*. Thompson worked briefly as a consultant for *Life* magazine, which allowed him access to a first generation copy of the Zapruder film.¹³⁴ Using his access to the Zapruder film and conducting his own extensive research, Thompson developed his own analysis of the assassination that utilized a markedly different approach from his contemporaries.

Although Thompson cited the Warren Commission in *Six Seconds in Dallas*, his research focused more on the mechanics of the shooting itself. Instead of focusing on Oswald’s guilt or innocence and using the contradictions of the commission’s report to bolster that argument, Thompson instead created a new analytical and scientific study of both the physical and photographic evidence of the assassination. Thompson took a more basic approach that studied the evidence recovered from Dealey Plaza. This approach lessened criticism on the Warren Commission and attempted to establish the existence of a conspiracy in the first place. Thompson’s examination of the Kennedy assassination

¹³³ Fred Graham, “Studies in Disbelief,” *The New York Times*, February 18, 1968, 16,18; Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 119; Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 428-430.

¹³⁴ Wrone, *The Zapruder Film*, 78-79.

presented an interesting cross between academic and logical reasoning that built its conclusions from scientific and photographic evidence.¹³⁵

In *Six Seconds in Dallas*, Thompson argued that President Kennedy had been fired on by three different assassins in a triangulated crossfire. Thompson believed two assassins were in buildings above and behind the president's motorcade. Another assassin laid in wait behind the fence on the Grassy Knoll. Thompson studied the data collected by the Warren Report that indicated where ear-witnesses heard shots originate. By creating an average, Thompson found it probable that witnesses heard shots from both in front and behind the car. Thompson studied *Life's* superior copy of the Zapruder film and claimed he had found evidence that Governor Connally had been hit at a separate time than President Kennedy. By studying the individual frames, he noticed that Connally did not show a reaction to external stimulus until his shoulder and cheeks puffed out several frames later. Thompson compiled this data into graphs that indicated Connally was hit nearly one second after Kennedy.¹³⁶

Thompson's theories about the president's head wounds also proved revolutionary. Thompson believed that study of the Zapruder film and a photograph by eyewitness Mary Moorman proved the existence of a gunman on the Grassy Knoll. By studying *Life's* copy of the Zapruder film, Thompson found that President Kennedy's head pitched forward approximately two inches from Zapruder frames 312 to 313, the dramatic frame depicting the impact of the fatal headshot, before being driven backward against the seat of the presidential limousine. Thompson believed that these opposite

¹³⁵ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 191-192.

¹³⁶ Josiah Thompson, *Six Seconds in Dallas: A Micro-Study of the Kennedy Assassination Proving that Three Gunmen Murdered the President* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1967), 24-25, 70-76, 178-195.

reactions within a fraction of a second indicated that President Kennedy had been struck by two bullets from different directions almost simultaneously. The bullet which struck the president between frames 312 and 313 originated from behind the president. The shot which created the dramatic head-snap witnessed in addition frames apparently originated from the Grassy Knoll. Along with the puff of smoke witnessed by observers on the Triple Underpass in Dealey Plaza, Thompson cited a black and white photograph by Mary Moorman as showing the location of the Grassy Knoll gunman. In the Moorman photograph, a figure appeared to be positioned behind the fence and wearing a hat. To Thompson, the presence of this figure coupled with the other evidence made a Grassy Knoll assassin hard to ignore.¹³⁷

Thompson utilized witness testimony, photographic evidence, and scientific reasoning to build a tangible case for conspiracy. In *Six Seconds in Dallas*, he presented a succinct case that apparently did not require mental gymnastics or blind belief in zig-zagging bullets.¹³⁸ His background as an academic made it hard to dismiss Thompson as mentally unstable. Thompson even critiqued the theories of other conspiracy theorists and pointed out inaccuracies in their version of events in a chapter entitled, “Answered and Unanswered Questions.”¹³⁹ His work functioned not as an exoneration of Oswald but an exploration of the mechanics of the shooting itself. *Six Seconds in Dallas* represented one of the first attempts to provide conspiracy theories with a solid evidentiary background outside the Warren Commission Report.

¹³⁷ Thompson, *Six Seconds in Dallas*, 86-95, 126-129.

¹³⁸ Anson, “*They’ve Killed the President!*”, 85.

¹³⁹ Thompson, *Six Seconds in Dallas*, 216-251.

By 1967, several outlets in the media began to actively question the Warren Commission's findings that Lee Harvey Oswald had acted alone. The criticism leveled by the Warren Commission critics found serious consideration by several prominent publications that originally lauded the Warren Commission's investigation. *Life* magazine, owners of the rights to the Zapruder film, expressed concerns with the commission's explanation. A November 1966 issue of the magazine featured the headline "A Matter of Reasonable Doubt" with a full color image from the Zapruder film on the cover. Inside, an article called for a reinvestigation into the assassination and featured high-resolution frames of the Zapruder film that suggested the commission's single-bullet theory was incorrect.¹⁴⁰ Approximately one year later, an issue of *Life* attempted to explain away many of the conspiracy theories through the photographic evidence. One of the key points of contention concerned a photograph that appeared to show a shadowy figure present near a cement retaining wall in front of the Grassy Knoll's picket fence. *Life* theorized that this was not an assassin but an observer who later joined two other men on a set of concrete stairs leading down to Elm Street.¹⁴¹ In addition, *Life* considered allowing Josiah Thompson the right to use specific Zapruder frames for *Six Seconds in Dallas*. However, Thompson's relationship with *Life* soured after Thompson was caught making illegal copies of Zapruder frames with a personal camera. *Life* unsuccessfully attempted to sue Thompson for using charcoal reproductions of key frames in his book.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ "A Matter of Reasonable Doubt," *Life*, November 25, 1966, 38-48B, 54; Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 121.

¹⁴¹ "November 22, 1963, Dallas: Photos by nine bystanders," *Life*, November 24, 1967, 92-93.

¹⁴² Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 191-193.

United Press International (UPI) followed a similar route as *Life* magazine in studying the photographic evidence that conspiracists claimed showed multiple gunman in Dealey Plaza. UPI owned the rights to the Orville Nix film, shot across the street from Abraham Zapruder during the assassination. Although the film lacked the clarity and completeness of the Zapruder film, Nix had captured the fatal headshot and the Grassy Knoll in the background. Several conspiracists believed Nix's film contained evidence of other assassins in Dealey Plaza. Some pointed to several frames which appeared to show an assassin, with a rifle raised to his face in a classic gunman stance, firing at the presidential motorcade from the railyard behind the picket fence. Cashing in on the unfolding conspiracy mania of the mid-to-late 1960s, UPI editors realized they may have had evidence of a conspiracy from which they could profit. The editors sent their copy of the Nix Film to ITEK labs, a renowned photo analysis firm, for further study. ITEK's study of the Nix film revealed the "classic gunman image" in the Nix film was not a person but a trick of light and shadow from the trees that canopied the Grassy Knoll.¹⁴³

Life magazine and UPI were not alone in tackling conspiracy theories around the assassination. Although they had provided the Warren Commission with consistent support, *The New York Times* began to question the findings of the commission. By November 1966, *The New York Times* demanded reinvestigation "...because of the general confusion in the public mind raised by the publication of allegations and the many puzzling questions that have been raised."¹⁴⁴ This newfound focus by publishers such as *Life* and *The New York Times* demonstrated that major publications were not only

¹⁴³ Richard B. Trask, *Pictures of the Pain: Photography and the Assassination of President Kennedy* (Danvers: Yeoman Press, 1994), 191-195.

¹⁴⁴ "Unanswered Questions," *The New York Times*, November 25, 1966, 36; Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 121.

taking conspiracy claims seriously but felt they were a serious threat to American establishments.

Beyond Reasonable Doubts

As the Kennedy assassination approached its fifth anniversary, the message heralded by the conspiracy theorists was clear. To the critics, the investigation conducted by the federal government was a failure. The Warren Commission, despite its apparent attempts at preserving and exposing the truth, bungled the facts of the assassination and created further injustice. Conspiracy theorists felt the commission's assertion that Oswald had acted alone had little evidentiary support. Some critics even believed the commission had intentionally hidden the truth from the American people. An even smaller contingent of researchers held the opinion that the very conspirators who assassinated the president controlled the decisions of the Warren Commission. As the years progressed, faith in the Warren Report continued to falter and the actions of the commission became as reviled as the alleged conspirators who slayed the president in Dallas. Not only had they allowed the murderers of John F. Kennedy to remain free, they continued to murder the truth in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

The first push made by the conspiracy theorists in the 1960s represented a pursuit of justice. Although there existed modes for fame and financial gain from the assassination, the motivation behind the conspiracist critics remained one that emphasized personal interest and a vigilant duty to the truth. Many of the critics treated the assassination as an active criminal case. It became imperative that the murderers be found. At the time, the assassination had not drifted into distant memory and it

encapsulated a relevant point of contention; one in which trust in the institutions of justice and order in the country balanced.

Early critics of the official narrative of the president's assassination created a tapestry of ideas that became hard to ignore. Played against the backdrop of political and social changes of the 1960s, conspiracy theorists bound the assassination to the whirlwind changes and growing feelings of unease and dissatisfaction that faced Americans daily. Public distrust in government grew as American involvement in Vietnam continued to escalate. The lofty ambitions of President Johnson's "Great Society" collapsed. Issues of economic and racial inequality became impossible to overlook and erupted into violence. By early 1968, uncertainty defined the trajectory of the nation. In this precarious environment, conspiracy theories took root in the American consciousness.

Warren Commission critics successfully interjected the idea of reasonable doubt into the Kennedy Assassination. The nagging question of doubt burned itself into the American consciousness as the country sustained further political and cultural disorder. This doubt in the specifics of the assassination and the federal investigation also established an elastic ambiguity to the evidence. Although the official investigators and the critics utilized the same evidence, they all saw different things or formed different conclusions. This patchwork of varying ideas formed a hazy overall image of the president's assassination, one that supported the possibility of assassins hiding in the shadows of blurry photographs or actively threatening eyewitnesses into toeing the official line.

By 1967, the Warren Commission critics succeeded in turning the court of public opinion further toward their version of the truth. As the polls demonstrated, a clear majority of Americans had come to believe that a conspiracy was responsible for the murder of a popular, young president. The conspiracists created a convincing argument against the official narrative by utilizing the Warren Commission Report itself. By banding together and focusing their efforts on the commission's investigation, they severely weakened trust in government explanation and pushed for a proper reexamination of the evidence. However, this solidarity would be short lived. The years 1966 and 1967 represented the high-water mark of the first generation of Kennedy assassination conspiracy theorists. As the nation struggled to survive the latter half of the 1960s and early 1970s, the assassination research community lost nearly all cohesive unity. Suspicion and doubt escalated to new heights of paranoia. The heavens were ready to fall.

II. Some Dare Call It Treason (1968-1975)

On July 15, 1967, a peculiar event occurred on national television. Nearly thirty-minutes of programming aired on the National Broadcasting Company's (NBC) channel that concerned the assassination of President Kennedy. Although there had been previous coverage of the assassination throughout the years, this program differed significantly from previous endeavors. It neither looked back on the president's death from a journalists' perspective nor aimed to confirm the specifics of the Warren Commission Report; that a lone assassin had killed the president in Dallas. Instead, it presented an unfiltered and unsettling account of the murder that had paralyzed the nation since November 22, 1963. Nestled between shell-shocked news reports from the fiery and war-torn jungles of Vietnam, a tall, dapper man in a gray suit spoke directly to the American people about the Kennedy assassination. In a baritone Louisiana drawl, he spoke at lengths about the one specific omission of most national media coverage: conspiracy. This televised appearance by New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, a direct response to an earlier NBC special that had attempted to deride his recently exposed criminal investigation into the president's murder, brought Garrison's own version of the assassination, and its motives, into the homes of millions of Americans.

In his televised response, Garrison assaulted the Warren Commission Report. To Garrison, the report and the official government investigation constituted little more than fiction. Garrison likened the report to a fairy tale engineered to provide safety for the American public. Looking directly at the camera, Garrison intoned that "...in the real world, in which you and I must live, fairy tales are dangerous. They're dangerous because they are untrue. Anything which is untrue is dangerous. And it is all the more

dangerous when the fairy tale becomes accepted as reality simply because it has an official seal of approval, or because honorable men announce you must believe it, or because powerful elements of the press tell you the fairy tale is true.” To Garrison, dark forces within the United States government intentionally murdered the president to allow escalation and profit from America’s involvement in Southeast Asia.¹

On that night in July 1967, Garrison’s stark explanation for the Kennedy murder proved prophetic for the direction that the conspiracy research community and the assassination narrative would take into the mid-1970s. In the following months and years, the investigation, trial, and aftermath that constituted *The State of Louisiana v. Clay L. Shaw* represented a turning point in the feelings and perceptions of the American public concerning the assassination of President Kennedy. These events also significantly shaped feelings toward conspiracy theories in general. Building on the momentum created by a cadre of concerned citizens not satisfied with the official explanation of President Kennedy’s death, the question of conspiracy took center stage in a New Orleans courtroom over five years after the polarizing events of November 1963. Although the court case named New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw as the defendant, the proceedings quickly evolved into more extensive and sinister accusations. Jim Garrison envisioned the trial as a means to publicly expose the forces he believed responsible for the president’s death. He also hoped to expose the Warren Commission Report as an apparent fraud in the eyes of the American public. Most importantly, Garrison’s investigation and trial represented a necessary metamorphosis of thought concerning the Kennedy assassination,

¹ Jim Garrison, “Jim Garrison’s Response – Kennedy Assassination,” NBC, July 15, 1967, YouTube, 27:05, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hqo2c_SxQag.

one that ensured its survival well beyond the events of the Clay Shaw trial and the turbulent decade of the 1960s.

Although Garrison's attempt to convict Shaw ultimately proved unsuccessful, and in the process labeled him a laughing stock in the eyes of the news media, and hurt the credibility and progress of the Warren Commission critics who had been working for years on pushing their version of the truth about the assassination, Garrison's theories of a vast government conspiracy to kill President Kennedy eventually found some public acceptance and became a default position in popular assassination ideology. Garrison attached anti-Vietnam War sentiment to the theories surrounding the assassination. For him, not only was the assassination a product of a conspiracy but the motivation for this conspiracy represented a coup d'état, one that allowed a shadow government to send thousands of Americans to die in the napalm soaked jungles of Southeast Asia for the profit of an elite group that secretly controlled the United States.

Garrison and the conspiracists also saw the assassination as a significant break between the idealized postwar America of the late 1940s and 1950s and the chaotic uncertainty of the 1960s. When the fatal shot struck the president's head, the ideal of American prosperity and progress following the Second World War died with him. By the mid-1970s, these ideas, ones that tied America's nostalgia and loss of innocence to factors beyond the control of American citizens, became commonplace in the consciousness of the American public, adding to the growing erosion of trust in their governmental institutions and leaders. Garrison and his supporters effectively prophesied and cultivated the intense feelings of paranoia and distrust that permeated American culture in the era of Watergate and the "Pentagon Papers." Many of these feelings were

later stoked by Congressional-led investigations into the actions of the intelligence agencies across the globe during the late-1940s through the mid-1960s.²

While Garrison and his allies aided in pushing the ideas of conspiracy into the minds of Americans, the broader distribution of Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories also benefited from further mainstream exposure outside previously marginalized assassination conspiracy circles. In the wake of the Clay Shaw Trial, other dedicated conspiracy theorists as well as some elements of popular culture, specifically film, assimilated many of the theories and underlying fears prevalent in the latter half of the 1960s into further palatable and transferable forms. The early-to-mid 1970s saw the release of several popular motion pictures that dealt directly with high-profile conspiracies within the United States government. These digestible and relatable cultural reactions engrained themselves on the assassination narrative and the American psyche of the 1970s.³ Most notably, a group of determined assassination experts kept the controversial flame of conspiracy alive and aided in reviving public and congressional interest in the case. The work of a young and upcoming researcher named Robert J. Groden brought the Zapruder Film out of the vaults of *Life* magazine and into the homes of millions of Americans for the first time. The conspiracy theories of the assassination could no longer be ignored, pushing the federal government into action.

² In the mid-1970s, both the Church Committee and the Rockefeller Commission found that the CIA participated in a variety of coups and assassinations in foreign countries. The investigations also uncovered that United States intelligence agencies unlawfully spied and collected information on Americans. See: United States, Congress, U.S. Senate, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders: An Interim Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, United States Senate, Together with Additional, Supplemental, and Separate Views* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975); United States, U.S. Department of State, *Report to the President by the Commission on CIA Activities Within the United States* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975)

³ For examples in popular film, see: *The Parallax View* (1974), *Chinatown* (1974), and *Executive Action* (1973).

In the subsequent years following the first wave of Warren Commission criticism, the Kennedy assassination transformed into a deeply personal event in America's collective consciousness. The assassination no longer lived in the minds of the public as an event consigned to history books or occasional reminiscence. For many, the signs of distrust and conspiracy had become evident in all corners of government. To the researchers and public feverishly parsing details like the Warren Commission critics of the 1960s, the assassination remained a defining social event. However, in this emerging conspiratorial atmosphere, the assassination now marked the point where the previously unseen forces of darkness had become visible.

Disturbance on Dauphine Street

When Clay Shaw opened the front door of his New Orleans, Louisiana, townhouse on the evening of March 1, 1967, one of the twentieth century's strangest periods of judicial history began. Shaw, a regal and respected businessman, found himself faced with a warrant for his arrest. Handed down by the New Orleans District Attorney's office, the warrant alleged that he was part of a conspiracy to murder the President of the United States. Garrison charged Shaw with allegedly cultivating, conspiring, and aiding in an intricate plot to assassinate John F. Kennedy.⁴ On that day in March, the New Orleans District Attorney's office set the groundwork for what became the only criminal trial for the murder of President John F. Kennedy. Shaw became the only person prosecuted for the assassination of the president in a court of law, a distinction that even alleged assassin Lee Harvey Oswald did not hold.

⁴ Jim Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins: My Investigation and Prosecution of the Murder of President Kennedy* (New York: Sheridan Square Press, 1988), 144-145.

Garrison's involvement with the assassination began in the immediate aftermath of President Kennedy's assassination. At the time of the president's death, Garrison had already established himself as a controversial and outspoken figure in Louisiana politics by taking on corruption in New Orleans and conducting his duties as District Attorney of the city using dynamic and controversial methods.⁵ A veteran of the Second World War and a loyal Democrat, he found himself significantly affected by the news of President Kennedy's assassination. Following up on a lead that Lee Harvey Oswald, the man Dallas Police suspected of killing the president, resided in New Orleans in the summer of 1963, the New Orleans District Attorney's office interviewed David Ferrie on November 25, 1963. Ferrie, a former Army Civil Service pilot connected to the New Orleans underground, had allegedly known Oswald and also had been in Texas at the time of the president's death. Ferrie's contradictory and absurd answers when interrogated led Garrison to conclude that Ferrie knew more than he was initially telling investigators. Garrison ordered Ferrie arrested and turned him over to the FBI.⁶ However, the FBI released Ferrie without any follow-up investigation since Oswald had been murdered by Dallas nightclub owner Jack Ruby on November 24. Trusting the FBI, Garrison dropped the matter and later reflected that, "Nothing was farther from my mind than the possibility that the federal government might have reason to lie."⁷

⁵ Gerald Posner, *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 421-424. Garrison charged the former New Orleans district attorney, Richard Dowling, with malfeasance. During his campaign to clean up the city's French Quarter, Garrison targeted gay bars and invited journalists to witness the spectacle.

⁶ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 3, 6-8, 11. Ferrie told Garrison and his investigators that he had been ice skating in the area of Houston, Texas. Garrison noted that the region experienced severe thunderstorms and unusually humid weather.

⁷ Jim Garrison, *A Heritage of Stone* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), 15.

By 1966, Garrison's interest in the Kennedy assassination reignited. The publication of the Warren Commission's report and the subsequent critical firestorm that resulted in the escalating conspiracy theory movement led to Garrison's renewed involvement. According to his autobiographical account of the Clay Shaw trial and investigation, he claimed a discussion with Louisiana Senator and Warren Commission critic Russell Long inspired Garrison to seek out and read the contents of all twenty-six volumes of the Warren Commission Report and weigh the evidence himself.⁸ Authors such as Joan Mellen, though, challenged this version of events concerning Garrison's renewed interest in the Kennedy assassination. In her revised account, Garrison met not with Long but Louisiana congressman Hale Boggs, a former member of the Warren Commission, who expressed lingering doubts about the government's investigation, namely in the Commission's approval of the single-bullet theory. Mellen believes Garrison sought to protect Boggs's reputation and slightly altered his version of events concerning his reinterest in the murder of President Kennedy.⁹

After reading the twenty-six volumes of the Warren Commission Report and noting significant inaccuracies, Garrison started his investigation. He focused on Lee Harvey Oswald's connection to New Orleans, particularly his activities as a supposed Communist sympathizer. By tracking an address Oswald printed on the back of a pro-Castro leaflet, Garrison found Oswald's headquarters for his Fair Play for Cuba Committee shared the same building as Guy Banister, a former intelligence agent active in anti-Cuban gunrunning.¹⁰ Garrison also interviewed a former Bannister colleague who

⁸ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 13-14.

⁹ Joan Mellen, *A Farewell to Justice: Jim Garrison, JFK's Assassination, and the Case That Should Have Changed History* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2013), 2.

¹⁰ Garrison, *A Heritage of Stone*, 91-92.

claimed Oswald and David Ferrie frequented Bannister's office. According to Garrison's contacts, the CIA reportedly used the site for covert operations. This revelation led Garrison's office to conclude that Oswald, with his background in the United States Marine Corps and his defection to Russia from 1959 to 1962 had posed as a communist sympathizer and gathered intelligence information on activities involving Cuba for Bannister and the CIA. Even more shocking, Garrison began to entertain the idea that Oswald had been manipulated and even set-up by intelligence agents to "take the fall" for President Kennedy's assassination.¹¹

After making these tentative connections between Oswald, Ferrie, and Bannister, Garrison turned his attention to "Clay Bertrand," a mysterious person apparently connected to both Oswald and the activities at Bannister's office. Dean Andrews, a New Orleans attorney previously questioned by the Warren Commission, claimed to have interacted with Bertrand and Oswald during the summer of 1963. Andrews told the commission that Bertrand had hired him to represent Oswald legally. Andrews told Garrison he never met Bertrand in person, although Andrews provided a physical description of Bertrand under oath to the Warren Commission. However, Andrews' testimony suggested he imagined the alleged meeting while ill and under the influence of marijuana.¹² By using a network of contacts in the seedier parts of the city, Garrison believed he had identified "Clay Bertrand" as Clay Shaw, director of the New Orleans Trade Mart and a prominent member of New Orleans society.¹³ Garrison also asserted Shaw had been involved in clandestine CIA activities that used the New Orleans Trade

¹¹ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 21-22, 28, 61.

¹² Posner, *Case Closed*, 427-429.

¹³ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 85-87.

Mart as a cover to subvert communist activities and finance major political assassinations in Europe. However, according to researcher Max Holland, the publications and documents Garrison used for this claim proved questionable and suggested disinformation from Russian intelligence.¹⁴

After apparently identifying “Clay Bertrand,” Garrison’s office also found witnesses who placed Shaw in the presence of both Oswald and Ferrie in the months before the president’s assassination. Two of these witnesses proved vital to establishing a connection between Shaw and Garrison’s alleged conspiracy. A young car insurance salesman named Perry Russo also told Garrison’s investigators he overheard Shaw, Ferrie, and Oswald planning the president’s assassination at a party. Another witness, Vernon Bundy, claimed he had seen Oswald in the company of Shaw at Lake Pontchartrain, Louisiana, and even found one of Oswald’s pro-Castro leaflets at the scene.¹⁵ Taking Bundy’s claims at face value, Garrison touted Bundy as a reliable witness despite Bundy’s history as a narcotics addict.¹⁶ Garrison’s investigators also tracked down several witnesses who had seen Oswald, Ferrie, Bannister, and Shaw together at an African American voter drive in Clinton, Louisiana.¹⁷ Garrison believed the evidence further indicated Shaw was the mysterious “Clay Bertrand” and that the eyewitness claims connected Shaw to Oswald, Ferrie, and Bannister’s Anti-Castro intelligence organization. Despite believing Shaw was “Clay Bertrand,” Ferrie remained

¹⁴ Max Holland, “The Demon in Jim Garrison,” *The Wilson Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2001): 12-13, accessed August 28, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40260180>.

¹⁵ Mellen, *A Farewell to Justice*, 113-115, 148-149.

¹⁶ Posner, *Case Closed*, 438.

¹⁷ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 105-107.

the District Attorney's primary person of interest due to his presence in Texas during the weekend of the assassination.¹⁸

Although there had been rumors and murmuring about the New Orleans District Attorney's office investigation of the Kennedy assassination, the story did not hit newsstands until February 17, 1967.¹⁹ Following revelations of his criminal investigation into the assassination conspiracy, Garrison became vocal and outspoken about his theories surrounding the investigation. He defiantly told members of the press, "let justice be done or the heavens fall." In interviews, he bragged to have completely solved the mysteries surrounding the Kennedy assassination.²⁰ He actively believed government agencies had been responsible for plotting the murder of President Kennedy in order to bring about the Vietnam War.²¹ The conspiracy Garrison asserted as responsible for the assassination of President Kennedy continued to grow larger in his view, encompassing both local and federal authorities in its expanding web.

Garrison's internal paranoia also reached new heights. He even suspected members of his investigative team were actually government agents attempting to subvert any progress or steal crucial files.²² The exposure of Garrison investigation seeking the president's assassins generated many responses not only from his office but also the community of Warren Commission critics who had fought for a re-investigation into the events surrounding President Kennedy's death. Garrison's investigation, as well as the subsequent trial of Clay Shaw, divided the Kennedy assassination research community.

¹⁸ Mellen, *A Farewell to Justice*, 102-103.

¹⁹ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 129-130.

²⁰ Posner *Case Closed*, 435.

²¹ Garrison, *A Heritage of Stone*, 156.

²² Garrison, *A Heritage of Stone*, 442-446.

Prominent critics such as Mark Lane, Harold Weisberg, and photo-analyst Ray Marcus pledged their support to Garrison's efforts, even venturing to New Orleans to personally assist the District Attorney's office. However, other well-known critics of the Warren Commission such as Sylvia Meagher and Edward J. Epstein were suspicious of Garrison's motives. They also criticized his inability to admit mistakes in his research and his reliance on often fantastic and untenable theories.²³

Garrison's investigation started to unravel within days of its admitted existence to the public. Immediately after finding out Garrison's investigation was out in the open, David Ferrie, who remained the New Orleans District Attorney's chief target for charges of conspiracy, became increasingly paranoid and refused to reveal any further information to the District Attorney's office.²⁴ Less than a week after the announcement of the investigation, police found Ferrie dead in his apartment under seemingly mysterious circumstances. Police investigators found two hastily written suicide notes and a multitude of empty prescription medication bottles at the scene. The medical examiner ruled Ferrie's death the result of a brain aneurysm. However, Garrison suspected foul play was responsible for Ferrie's premature and convenient death. He surmised the CIA had most likely killed Ferrie, or perhaps other intelligence agencies intervened, to stop him from revealing any more information on the "plot" that killed President Kennedy. Although the issue of disappearing or dead witnesses had presented problems before, the death of Ferrie dealt a severe blow to the case that had been building since the previous year.²⁵

²³ John Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation: The Assassination of John F. Kennedy and the First Generation Critics of the Warren Report* (San Antonio: Wings Press, 2007) 390-396, 404, 435.

²⁴ Mellen, *A Farewell to Justice*, 103-106.

²⁵ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 140-144.

With David Ferrie dead and the investigation now under increasing public scrutiny, Garrison knew he had to name a suspect to bring to trial. The March 1, 1967, arrest of Clay Shaw, for conspiracy in the murder of President John F. Kennedy, proved a desperate and sensational reaction by the District Attorney's office to save the case. The dubious and circumstantial evidence collected even made Garrison doubt the case would ever go to trial until the media outed his investigation, forcing the New Orleans District Attorney to play his hand.²⁶ Shaw represented a more problematic defendant to convict in comparison to Ferrie. The difference in physical appearance and societal stature between Ferrie and Shaw was enormous. Ferrie, a wild-eyed member of New Orleans seedy underworld, wore outrageous wigs and painted-on eyebrows.²⁷ On the other hand, Shaw was a respected member of New Orleans aristocracy. Garrison now found himself creating a diverse cast of new and powerful enemies including the hierarchy that controlled the city of New Orleans.²⁸

Despite Garrison's highly influential status as head of the district attorney's office in one of the largest cities in the southern United States, he portrayed his struggle to expose the supposed forces of darkness behind the Kennedy assassination as one of an underdog, a crusader for the people. Garrison placed himself in the trenches with the investigators who had severely damaged the credibility of the Warren Report. Significantly, Garrison's public image portrayed him as leading the charge for truth and justice.

²⁶ Robert Sam Anson, *"They've Killed the President!": The Search for the Murderers of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Bantam, 1975), 112; Posner, *Case Closed*, 435-436.

²⁷ Garrison, *A Heritage of Stone*, 121.

²⁸ Gene Roberts, "New Orleans Hearing Today May Clarify Charges of Assassination Plot," *The New York Times*, March 14, 1967, 40.

The Trial of Clay Shaw

Although the unplanned announcement of the investigation and the arrest of Clay Shaw rattled the New Orleans District Attorney's office and further mobilized criticism of the government's viewpoint on President Kennedy's assassination, the media reaction to Garrison's New Orleans activities created the most significant impact on perceptions of the investigation and trial. Garrison's investigation and impending prosecution changed how the media dealt with Warren Commission criticism and suggested theories of conspiracy. Although *Life* and *Ramparts* magazines published stories urging a reappraisal of the lone gunman theory, negative press responses dominated.²⁹ After the trial began, some newspaper articles focused on Garrison's unorthodox uses of hypnosis and sodium pentothal on his key eyewitnesses.³⁰

Although printed attacks toward the investigation and impending trial seriously hurt the public's perception and thoughts on credibility concerning the events occurring in New Orleans in 1967, television coverage provided the most biased and damaging forms of attention directed toward Jim Garrison. Television news media had garnered new credibility and power following the assassination of President Kennedy and by 1967, millions of Americans tuned into and trusted major television networks for not only news but as a survey of shared national feelings and consciousness.³¹ NBC and CBS were both equally disparaging in their treatment of Garrison's investigation. NBC invited Garrison to make an appearance on Johnny Carson's *The Tonight Show*. The usually amiable

²⁹ Tamara Naccarato, "The Case of Jim Garrison versus the Free Press," *The Student Historical Journal* 23 (1991-1992): 3-5, accessed August 28, 2019, <http://www.loyno.edu/~history/journal/1991-2/documents/TheCaseofJimGarrisonVersustheFreePress.pdf>.

³⁰ Martin Waldron, "Hypnosis a Factor in New Orleans Trial of Shaw," *The New York Times*, February 10, 1969, 30.

³¹ Peter Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 20-22.

Carson adopted an air of skeptical disillusionment with Garrison's theories, verbally sparring with him for over forty minutes, as the in-studio crowd reacted positively to Garrison.³² NBC also created a one-hour long *White Paper* special that dissected the investigation in New Orleans. The *White Paper* special concluded Garrison had bribed and threatened witnesses to advance his political career but presented little to no evidence depicting Garrison's side of the case.³³ Over four successive nights, CBS also produced a four-hour defense of the Warren Commission Report. Hosted by Walter Cronkite, the program discredited any evidence of conspiracy and portrayed the New Orleans District Attorney's investigation negatively.³⁴ From this point forward, intensely negative media attacks hounded not only Garrison but anyone who suggested the Warren Commission had erred in their assessment that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone.³⁵ The consistent media assault on Garrison, following the exposure of his investigation and the arrest of Shaw, sharply hurt his credibility and the stability of his case in the eyes of the American public.³⁶

Following the intense media focus and attacks on the prosecution's case, the legal proceedings of *The State of Louisiana v. Clay L. Shaw* officially began on January 29, 1969, with Judge Edward Aloysius Haggerty presiding. During the interval between his arrest and the trial, Shaw assembled a crack team of defense attorneys to represent him at

³² Johnny Carson, "Jim Garrison Vs. Johnny Carson (January 31, 1968)," *The Tonight Show*, NBC, January 31, 1968, YouTube video, 47:15. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZN2FGHKzQi>; *JFK: 3 Shots that Changed America*, directed by Nicole Rittenmeyer and Seth Skundrick (2009; A&E Television Networks, 2010), DVD.

³³ Frank McGee, "The JFK Conspiracy: The Case of Jim Garrison," *NBC News White Paper*, NBC, June 19, 1967, YouTube video, 57:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8Ef14XoqxU>; Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 165-171.

³⁴ Walter Cronkite, "A CBS News Inquiry: The Warren Report," CBS, June 25-27, 1967, YouTube video, 3:28:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpO0a6gRceo>.

³⁵ Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 405-408.

³⁶ Mellen, *A Farewell to Justice*, 204.

the proceedings. Foreshadowing the carnivalesque atmosphere of the proceedings, Judge Haggerty declared a recess on the first day of the trial so the jury and members of the press could witness the annual Mardi Gras parade.³⁷ Garrison's opening statement on February 6, 1969, outlined the evidence he intended to present and the conviction he hoped to procure. Instead of primarily focusing on Shaw's guilt concerning the conspiracy charges, Garrison centered his opening statement on the validity of the Warren Commission Report and his belief in Lee Harvey Oswald's alleged innocence. Garrison's opening remarks focused heavily on establishing evidence that multiple shooters in Dealey Plaza assassinated President Kennedy in a triangulated crossfire.³⁸ After delivering a nearly hour-long opening statement to the jury, Garrison designated the task of examining witnesses Assistant District Attorneys Jim Alcock and Alvin Oser. At this point, he felt it necessary to remove himself from the focus of the media, many of whom felt Garrison was using the trial to expand his political career.³⁹

The prosecution's choice of witnesses undermined their case. Despite the testimony of Russo, Bundy, and the eyewitnesses who claimed to have seen Shaw and Oswald together in Clinton, Louisiana, the sudden appearance of one eyewitness destroyed the validity of the prosecution's case and highlighted the paranoid stigma the media had attached to Garrison's theories. Shortly before the trial began, Garrison's investigators uncovered a potential witness named Charles Spiesel, a New York psychologist. Like Russo, Spiesel claimed he overheard Shaw and Oswald plotting President Kennedy's murder at a party in New Orleans, months before the assassination

³⁷ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 230-231.

³⁸ "Opening Statement of the District Attorney," *State of Louisiana v. Clay L. Shaw*, February 6, 1969, <https://www.maryferrell.org/showDoc.html?docId=1271#relPageId=2&tab=page>.

³⁹ Mellen, *A Farewell to Justice*, 302.

in Dallas. Instead of verifying the claims of Spiesel, the prosecution rushed the witness to the stand. On cross-examination, Shaw's defense team destroyed Spiesel's credibility revealing he was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic who went to the efforts of fingerprinting his college-aged daughter to see if she was an imposter.⁴⁰ The defense and press utilized the event to significant effect, labeling the prosecution's witnesses as unstable and unreliable.⁴¹ The Spiesel cross-examination tainted the testimony of other witnesses as the jury now looked at the prosecution's witness list with skepticism. Garrison himself considered it one of the most significant blunders of the entire trial.⁴²

Aside from eyewitness testimony, the centerpiece to the prosecution's case for conspiracy in the assassination centered on the Zapruder film. The film's graphic and shocking contents suggested inconsistencies with the Warren Commission finding that a single assassin killed the president. However, access to the polarizing film proved problematic to Garrison and his prosecution team. Since the weekend of the assassination in 1963, Time-Life Inc. owned the rights to the Zapruder film. Outside of *Life* magazine and the Warren Commission Report, Time-Life strictly excluded other media outlets from publishing frames or showing the film. Using his powers as District Attorney, Garrison subpoenaed the Zapruder film from Time-Life as evidence in court. Although they initially attempted to fight the court order, Time-Life were forced to allow Garrison access to a copy of the original film.⁴³

⁴⁰ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 230, 236-237.

⁴¹ James Kirkwood, *American Grottesque* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 245-248.

⁴² Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 237.

⁴³ Richard B. Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film* (Danvers: Yeoman Press, 2005) 147, 194-195.

The public screening of the Zapruder film by the prosecution quickly became one of the most lasting and haunting moments of the entire trial. In anticipation of the event, a media frenzy erupted and reporters crowded into the stuffy New Orleans courtroom on February 13, 1969, to catch a glimpse of the controversial home movie.⁴⁴ Although the defense objected to the grisly content of the film and its relevance, Judge Haggerty allowed the prosecution to proceed. When the reel began, the courtroom fell silent, aside from the sound of the projector and the shuffling of journalists edging closer to get a better view of the screen. Members of the court audience and jury gasped when President Kennedy was struck in the head by a bullet and violently thrown back against the seat of the presidential limousine.⁴⁵ Garrison and the prosecution believed this visceral image of the president hurtled backward indicated that a shot had originated from in front of the president, not behind him as the Warren Commission claimed. After the initial viewing, the prosecution ran the film nearly a dozen times in an attempt to cement the film as persuasive visual evidence of a conspiracy in the minds of both the jury and the public.⁴⁶

Although the courtroom viewings of the controversial home movie earned a firm press and public reaction, the Zapruder film proved valuable to Garrison in another way. While in his possession, he and Mark Lane created over one hundred illegal bootleg copies of the film. Although of poor quality, these prints assured Time-Life Inc. would no longer be able to hide what Garrison and other Warren Commission critics perceived as evidence of a conspiracy. Garrison distributed the bootleg copies to other members of the assassination research community allied with him. Even if the trial ended in an acquittal,

⁴⁴ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 195.

⁴⁵ Kirkwood, *American Grotesque*, 314-316.

⁴⁶ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 196-197.

conspiracy theorists still had access to what they interpreted as the definitive record of the entire assassination. With the copies, conspiracy advocates gained a vital weapon that could be transported and shown at college campuses and seeded Garrison's theories of a government cover-up in the minds of a younger generation. While other aspects of his court case faltered or fell flat, the copies Garrison created of the Zapruder film assured the idea of a conspiracy in the Kennedy assassination remained alive.⁴⁷

Despite the dramatic viewing of the Zapruder film and the testimony of other eyewitnesses, the prosecution's case took another significant blow when Judge Haggerty excused the jury from the courtroom during the testimony of New Orleans Police Officer Aloysius Habighorst. Habighorst booked Shaw following his arrest and asked Shaw if he used any aliases. Shaw allegedly responded with "Clay Bertrand" and Habighorst recorded this into the official record.⁴⁸ When Habighorst was called to testify, Judge Haggerty excused the jury because of a violation of Shaw's Miranda Rights. An angry exchange between the prosecution and the bench erupted. However, Judge Haggerty's order concerning Habighorst stood, barring the jury from hearing his testimony. The prosecution's main link tying Shaw to the name "Clay Bertrand" became severed.⁴⁹

Although their attempts at establishing Shaw's guilt were mainly futile, the prosecution still presented evidence that argued for a larger, overall conspiracy. The prosecution called witnesses who the Warren Commission had ignored, including eyewitnesses to the president's assassination who had allegedly heard shots from other areas of Dealey Plaza. The prosecution also called Dr. Pierre Finck, one of the

⁴⁷ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 197-198.

⁴⁸ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 145.

⁴⁹ Mellen, *A Farewell to Justice*, 308-310.

pathologists present at the Kennedy autopsy at Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland, to the stand. The questioning of Finck suggested the Warren Commission's reliance on the medical evidence was faulty and that the autopsy had been controlled by high ranking naval and military officials.⁵⁰ The prosecution also examined the photographic evidence of the president's assassination and challenged the Warren Commission's controversial single-bullet theory before resting.⁵¹

Feeling confident in their case and following the implosion of several of the prosecution's key points, Shaw's defense team called only a minimal amount of witnesses. The most notable witness to take the stand for the defense was Clay Shaw himself, which shocked Garrison and his staff. On the stand, Shaw denied any connection to Oswald or the CIA and bolstered his image of respected businessman and American to the jury.⁵² Following Shaw's testimony and closing remarks by both the prosecution and the defense, Judge Haggerty excused the jury to deliberate on the verdict.⁵³

On March 1, 1969, the jury acquitted Clay Shaw of conspiracy in the murder of President Kennedy. The jury's decision for acquittal took less than one hour to reach.⁵⁴ Garrison failed to produce adequate evidence to implicate Shaw beyond a reasonable doubt. The acquittal of Clay Shaw represented more than a failure on Garrison's behalf as a prosecutor. The prosecution of Shaw also proved divisive and disruptive to the work of the Warren Commission critics on which Garrison had based significant aspects of his case. Unlike Garrison's theories, many of the critics focused on the perceived failings of

⁵⁰ Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation*, 449.

⁵¹ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 239-241.

⁵² Kirkwood, *American Grotesque*, 403-411.

⁵³ Waldron, Martin, 'Shaw Acquitted of 'Kennedy Plot',' *The New York Times*, March 1, 1969, 16.

⁵⁴ Waldron, "Shaw Acquitted of 'Kennedy Plot'," 1.

the Warren Commission and did not implicate a complicated and nefarious coup d'état as responsible for the assassination. At the time, Garrison's version of events proved too far-fetched for a jury or the American public to accept at face value. The jury's verdict of acquittal also had another inadvertent repercussion. To the news media that had ridiculed the theories of the Warren Commission critics and Garrison's investigation, the verdict not only served as a vindication of the findings of the Warren Commission but also as a considerable blow to all conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination.⁵⁵

The results of Garrison's efforts created two distinct outcomes that affected the next five years of conspiracy research and thinking in the assassination. The negative media exposure and the debacle of Garrison's investigation forced the Kennedy assassination conspiracy movement into the shadows. Garrison lost any chance for reelection. Shaw attempted unsuccessfully to sue Garrison. The media continued to attack conspiracist claims in the wake of the controversial trial. The press either ignored or derided questions raised by the earlier Warren Commission critics. In 1973, David Belin, a former legal counsel member of the Warren Commission, published *November 22, 1963: You are the Jury* which intensely scorned the conspiracy theorists and the then-recent Garrison investigation. The news media poured intense amounts of praise on Belin's manuscript and its derision of conspiracy theories.⁵⁶

Garrison's involvement and the trial that followed sapped the momentum of the conspiracy movement. Some of the conspiracists remained intensely skeptical of

⁵⁵ Waldron, Martin, "Jury, Acquitting Shaw, Deals Blow to Garrison 'Plot' Theory," *The New York Times*, March 2, 1969, 56.

⁵⁶ Anson, "*They've Shot the President!*", 118-119, 148-149; George Johnson and Priscilla McMillan, "November 22, 1963: You Are the Jury. By Daniel W. Belin, Esq. Introduction by Harrison E. Salisbury. 544 pp. New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book Company. \$10 until Dec. 31, \$12.50 thereafter," *The New York Times*, November 19, 1973, 35-36, 38.

Garrison, even accusing him of being as corrupt and dishonest as the assassins he purported to chase. Some felt the case had been engineered solely to discredit their work.⁵⁷ Garrison's grandiose claims extended beyond the scope of the early conspiracists. He expanded the web of conspiracy to its logical breaking point. Following the disintegration of Garrison's high-profile court case, the push for reinvestigation into the president's murder cooled significantly. Although talk of conspiracy remained, its voice dwindled to a whisper as the country descended further into Vietnam and other pressing national issues took center stage. The Clay Shaw trial represented an embarrassing end to conspiracists' calls for justice. It signified the collapse of the first wave of 1960s era Warren Commission critics in the construction of a conspiracy-themed assassination narrative.⁵⁸

Despite damaging the credibility of the movement, the New Orleans investigation provided conspiracy theorists with a new weapon. The bootleg copies of the Zapruder film created by Garrison toured the country in the hands of researchers who believed Garrison's complex and malevolent government conspiracy. Researchers with the degraded copies of the film often showed the 8mm home movie to audiences at college campuses thus infusing a new generation with the idea of conspiracy. The contents of the film itself seemed to represent the necessary proof of conspiracy. The graphic image of the president's head snapping backwards after the fatal shot supposedly exposed the truth: that President Kennedy had been hit from the area of the Grassy Knoll.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Anson, "They've Shot the President!", 126-128; William L. O'Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s* (New York: Times Books, 1971), 103. Some conspiracy theorists believed Garrison had connections to organized crime.

⁵⁸ Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 125.

⁵⁹ Trask, *Pictures of the Pain*, 117.

However, these viewings also had a different purpose. Not only did researchers use the film to indoctrinate new converts to conspiracy thinking but also for monetary purposes. These shrewd researchers charged admission to see the film, and sold further bootlegged copies of the film, including sets of individual slides, so attendees could pore over the evidence of conspiracy in the comfort of their own homes. The bootleg copies of the controversial home movie helped solidify the growing conspiracy industry that had been initially built from printed publications and lecture appearances. Importantly, the further copying of the film also led to further deterioration of the film quality. The continual circulation of substandard copies generated new and wilder conspiracy theories.⁶⁰

A prevalent theory in later assassination literature spawned directly from the murky images of bootlegged frames of the Zapruder Film circulating in the early 1970s. Some researchers claimed that the Zapruder film showed the driver of the presidential limousine, Secret Service Agent William Greer, turn around and shoot the president. To further bolster their claims, they presented Zapruder frame 313, depicting the fatal headshot, which appeared to show Greer holding a chrome-plated pistol toward the president's direction. However, these claims generated from extended reproduction of Garrison's bootleg copies of the film which were of inferior quality. Examination of higher quality prints showed that Greer's hands were on the vehicle's steering wheel at the time of the fatal headshot and that the "chrome-plated pistol" was a reflection from the top of Secret Service Agent Roy Kellerman's hair in the passenger seat of the

⁶⁰ David Wrone, *The Zapruder Film: Reframing JFK's Assassination* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003), 60-61.

limousine.⁶¹ Despite the blow taken from the failure of the Shaw Trial, the conspiracy theory industry, became nearly self-sufficient by feeding off its own theories and expanding perceptions.

The emergence of Garrison and the trial of Clay Shaw brought American public opinion and thought to a crossroads. The ideas presented by Garrison, which existed somewhere between Ian Fleming and William Shakespeare, initially appeared to the public incredible and even outrageous. However, they began to gain general acceptance amongst the general population who were becoming both more cynical and more nostalgic by the mid-1970s. The American public found itself in a much different place than it had been before President Kennedy's assassination in November 1963. By the latter half of the 1960s and into the 1970s, images of growing war, civil unrest, and drastic cultural changes assailed Americans daily. The Vietnam situation continued to spiral out of control, damaging the credibility of the government.⁶² As inflation and unemployment rose, the future of the United States economy appeared uncertain. Leftist activism broke down as the optimism of the 1960s turned to violent and militant behavior.⁶³ The juxtaposition of these graphic scenes with that of an earlier and more positive era, less than a decade removed, allowed the conspiracy movement to root deep into America's collective consciousness. The Shaw Trial occurred at a crucial moment in time when the United States was in transition; bidding farewell to the uplifting promise of

⁶¹ Michael E. Miller, "JFK assassination conspiracy theories: the grassy knoll, Umbrella Man, LBJ, and Ted Cruz's dad," *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2017, accessed on July 31, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/10/24/jfk-assassination-conspiracy-theories-the-grassy-knoll-umbrella-man-lbj-and-ted-cruzs-dad/?utm_term=.adafde652244; *JFK: The Lost Bullet*. Produced by Robert Stone. 2011, Universal City, CA: Vivendi Entertainment, 2011. DVD.

⁶² O'Neill, *Coming Apart*, 408.

⁶³ James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 716-717, 737-738.

Kennedy's "New Frontier" and unwillingly forced to accept the reality of a harsh and uncertain future.

Aside from media coverage and the illegal screenings of the Zapruder film, the significance of Garrison's meddling ultimately led to the next evolution of conspiracy claims. Most importantly, Garrison changed the entire psychological topography of the assassination's interpretation. While the early critics had concerned themselves with picking apart commission exhibits or other forms of hard evidence, Garrison took the assassination to a more subconscious level of paranoia. In Garrison's narrative, not only did the conspiracy exist behind the façade of a functional government but it remained active, consistently protecting the conspiracy whether through its own means or through the media. Garrison's narrative essentially functioned as an evolution of conspiracy author Penn Jones, Jr.'s claims of mysterious witness deaths but larger and more tyrannical.⁶⁴ Shady assassins were not the only ones silencing witnesses through despicable means. This narrative asserted a mysterious cabal continually suppressed the truth of the assassination, instead pushing the official cover story that Oswald had acted alone. This view further stipulates that the military-industrial complex, which Garrison had accused of orchestrating President Kennedy's murder and the nation's involvement in the Vietnam War, continued to perpetuate the Warren Commission's "fairy tale" for their political gain at the expense of American lives and the objective truth. As the country continued to change and a new generation of researchers subscribing to Garrison's assassination narrative emerged, the idea of a far-reaching and continuing conspiracy eventually became the norm.

⁶⁴ Jones, a Texas newspaper editor, wrote a four-volume series on the Kennedy assassination entitled *Forgive My Grief* between 1966 and 1974.

A Cultural Watergate

Although the Shaw Trial damaged public perceptions of Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories, the conspiracy movement latched onto a growing culture of mistrust. By integrating countercultural ideas into their theories, conspiracy theorists ultimately allowed the movement to adapt and survive well beyond its genesis in the 1960s. Although the events of the extreme latter half of the 1960s damaged the credibility of those critical of the official version of the assassination story, the intense shift in ideological makeup, particularly in the motives behind the president's murder, ultimately allowed the claims of conspiracy to flourish in the wake of the disorganization of the 1960s.⁶⁵

Major international and national events greatly affected Americans' trust in their institutions and increased their acceptance of Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories. The latter half of the 1960s proved particularly beneficial to the cultivation of conspiracy theories. At the height of media attention surrounding the Warren Commission critics and Jim Garrison's investigation of the Kennedy assassination, the country underwent drastic social and political changes. The pivotal year of 1968 saw massive and violent demonstrations protesting the Vietnam War and American policies under both President Lyndon Johnson and President Richard Nixon. The Tet Offensive of January 1968 showed that the Vietnam conflict differed from what officials were telling the American public and damaged President Johnson's already low approval ratings. High profile political assassinations of popular individuals deeply affected the American public. The shooting death of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968 led to

⁶⁵ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 89.

rioting in major cities across the country. The June 1968 assassination of New York Senator Robert F. Kennedy, a popular Democratic presidential candidate and brother of John F. Kennedy, also shocked the nation and kicked off a summer punctuated by violent political demonstrations and unrest. By the end of the decade, prominent student-led activist organizations such as the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) fractured into radicalism. Some of the offshoots of SDS, such as the Weathermen, turned militant and staged their own violent forms of domestic terrorism against police and corporations.⁶⁶

The nation had also undergone a distinct cultural transformation in the 1960s. The “baby-boomer” generation (those born into the economic prosperity of Post-Second World War America) came of age as events such as the Kennedy assassination, Vietnam, and the Civil Rights Movement churned around them. The emergence of countercultural ideas further divided the younger baby-boomers from their parents and elders. The counterculture challenged the social and cultural order that had defined postwar America. The idealized image of President Johnson’s “Great Society” and an end to poverty continued to crumble. Violence erupted in the streets of major cities over racial and economic inequality and tensions.⁶⁷ By the end of the 1960s, it appeared as if the fabric that held the nation together had unraveled.

In the early years of the following decade, the American public found themselves dealing with several pressing political and social issues. The escalation and eventual American withdrawal from Vietnam claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Americans. Constant media reporting brought the graphic images and violence of war into the homes

⁶⁶ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 678-682, 685-686, 693-697, 716-717. Patterson notes that “Between September 1969 and May 1970, there were at least 250 bombings linked to white-dominated radical groups in the United States.”

⁶⁷ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 662-672.

of millions of Americans nightly. Not only did the constant engagement of American forces in Southeast Asia demoralize the country, the revelation that the American government mislead and lied to the American people about their situation in Vietnam further infuriated the general public.⁶⁸ The specter of conspiracy began to grow and, with it, a cultural ethos of conspiracy began to emerge.

The political and cultural turmoil caused by both international and domestic events boiled over into widespread paranoia and fear. Reflecting on the 1970s in his book *Strange Days Indeed – The 1970s: The Golden Age of Paranoia*, journalist and author Francis Wheen described the decade as having, “...a pungent mélange of apocalyptic dread and conspiratorial fever.”⁶⁹ Feelings of gloom over issues such as energy, famine, and the environment also contributed to a growing sense of pessimism.⁷⁰ Drastic shifts in culture, including interest in offbeat subjects such as Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs) and the occult, further destabilized an edifying center and left conspiracy thinking as a viable explanation for increasing political and social chaos.⁷¹ Conspiracy theories of both the right and left often converged on the same suspects and confirmed leftist scenarios of paranoia.⁷² Andreas Killen, an assistant professor of history at City College of New York and author of *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of Post-Sixties America*, argues that “the perceived collapse of established institutions necessitated a rewrite of the basic national storyline.”⁷³ Killen further contends “linking Dallas to

⁶⁸ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 253-254.

⁶⁹ Francis Wheen, *Strange Days Indeed – The 1970s: The Golden Age of Paranoia* (New York: Public Affaris, 2009), 9.

⁷⁰ Wheen, *Strange Days Indeed*, 7-8.

⁷¹ Wheen, *Strange Days Indeed*, 14-15, 284. Wheen notes that these subjects achieved their popularity because of exposure to college audiences at presentations and speaking tours.

⁷² Wheen, *Strange Days Indeed*, 300; Andreas Killen, *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of Post-Sixties America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), 228, 240.

⁷³ Killen, *1973 Nervous Breakdown*, 8.

Watergate held out the possibility of finding a master key to the traumatic decade framed by the two events.”⁷⁴ The Kennedy assassination became a critical episode in linking the state of the nation with growing public cynicism.

Although publications concerning the assassination and the conspiracy theories around it continued to circulate, conspiracists’ actions remained mostly muted at the start of the 1970s. Reduced to small circles of discussion, the conspiracists slowly rebuilt their investigative prowess under the newly formed Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).⁷⁵ The fury and obsession over the machinations of the president’s death simmered under the surface of American thought. However, the changing climate of the American political and social scene altered the perception and awareness of millions of Americans. The initially optimistic viewpoints of 1960s ideology soured into complete cynicism and distrust of federal institutions. A flurry of scandals and intrigue suggested a deeper and darker force controlled the aims of the state.⁷⁶ The 1970s unleashed an unprecedented degree of paranoia that brought the events of Dealey Plaza back into the full focus of the public eye.

Opinions on government actions during The Cold War, particularly American military involvement in Vietnam, provided one of the most significant flashpoints of American distrust of the federal government. As the dense jungles of Southeast Asia exploded into a fiery furnace of war and death, United States military engagement of communist North Vietnam turned Cold War tensions hot. Anxieties from the Cold War

⁷⁴ Killen, *1973 Nervous Breakdown*, 243.

⁷⁵ Goldberg, *Enemies Within* 126; Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 782. The Federal government created the FOIA in a failed attempt to reconcile accountability issues with the general public. Instead of building transparency, conspiracy theorists used the FOIA to amass what they considered evidence of secrecy.

⁷⁶ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 126.

had already made Americans weary of the government. Increased spending and military oversight became a concern. Americans feared both internal and external enemies. The conflict in Vietnam had divided the country. Resentment toward the conflict and the government grew as the physical war raged thousands of miles away, claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Americans in the jungles of Southeast Asia, and swallowed millions of tax dollars in a never-ending downward spiral.⁷⁷

Americans' feelings toward Vietnam were further exacerbated into rage by the release of the "Pentagon Papers" by *The New York Times* in 1971. Originally a series of reports created for United States Defense Secretary Robert McNamara in June 1967, the "Pentagon Papers" revealed that the scope of the Vietnam conflict extended far beyond the manmade borders of the countries of North and South Vietnam. Military exercises stretched beyond communist-controlled North Vietnam and into neighboring countries such as Laos and Cambodia. The papers outlined the continuation of the war was to stop Communist China's influence and "to avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat."⁷⁸ The contents of the documents also revealed that the United States secretly planned and approved the 1963 South Vietnamese Coup which resulted in the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem and drew the United States further into the conflict.⁷⁹ The leaked materials made apparent that the Vietnam War essentially had no end and that the continued cost of American combat lives and resources was of little consequence to the Department of

⁷⁷ Robert J. McMahon, *The Cold War: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 102-103, 117-120.

⁷⁸ John T. McNoughten, "McNaughten Draft for McNamara on "Proposed Course of Action"," in *The Pentagon Papers: The Secret History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Gerald Gold, Allan M. Siegal, and Samuel Abt (New York: Racehorse Publishing, 2017), 442-443.

⁷⁹ Hendrix Smith, "The Overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem: May-November 1963," in *The Pentagon Papers: The Secret History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Gerald Gold, Allan M. Siegal, and Samuel Abt (New York: Racehorse Publishing, 2017), 166-169.

Defense in their attempts at halting communism.⁸⁰ Most importantly, it also illustrated that the United States government had been lying to the American public about Vietnam since at least 1967. The federal government even attempted to thwart the publication of the controversial memorandums in *The New York Times*.⁸¹ The damaging content of the “Pentagon Papers” demonstrated that elements of the government operated outside the bound of transparency and essentially conducted actions to achieve their own ends at the expense of the country.⁸²

As Americans dealt with the full effects and toll of Vietnam, the ugly shadow of assassination crept back into view. The pressing presidential election of 1972 weighed heavily on the minds of many Americans. On May 15, 1972, Arthur Bremer attempted to shoot and kill Alabama Governor and Democratic presidential nominee George Wallace at a campaign rally in Laurel, Maryland. At the time of the assassination attempt, Wallace, an outspoken segregationist, polled favorably in the presidential race. Wallace survived the assassination attempt but was paralyzed.⁸³ The assassinations of revered political and social figures, such as Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., remained fresh in the minds of the American public; having occurred less than five years previous. While Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been idolized by more leftist leaning Americans, the attempted assassination of Wallace brought the potential reality of a politically motivated killing to the conservative right.⁸⁴ Like the

⁸⁰ Floyd Abrams, “The Pentagon Papers: A Decade Later,” *The New York Times Magazine*, June 7, 1981, 24-25.

⁸¹ Wheen, *Strange Days Indeed*, 100.

⁸² Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 254.

⁸³ Howell Raines, “George Wallace, Symbol of the Fight to Maintain Segregation, Dies at 79,” *The New York Times*, September 15, 1998, 38.

⁸⁴ Anson, “*They’ve Killed the President!*”, 361-362; Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 127.

other perpetrators charged with the assassinations of the 1960s, the assassin apparently acted alone. However, some suspected others were involved.⁸⁵

After the release of the “Pentagon Papers,” political scandals continued to eat away at the confidence the public had in government institutions. In June 1972, five men attempted to break into the headquarters of the Democratic National Convention in Washington D.C. but were apprehended. The FBI eventually connected two of the so-called burglars to a slush fund tied directly to the reelection campaign of the incumbent president Richard Nixon. Investigation into the break-in revealed the existence of audio tapes that eventually implicated Nixon in a coverup that clearly abused his executive powers. Nixon initially refused to turn over the tapes despite evidence of his involvement. The revelation that Nixon used his position and power as president to conduct illegal activities and manipulate a federal investigation incensed the nation and severely damaged the American public’s perception of federal accountability.⁸⁶ Realizing impeachment was imminent, Nixon resigned the office of the presidency on August 9, 1974. Vice president and former Warren Commission member Gerald Ford succeeded Nixon as president. Following his resignation, many wanted Nixon criminally prosecuted for his actions. However, one of Ford’s first actions as president included issuing Nixon a pardon for his previous indiscretions.⁸⁷ To those who had lost faith in the government, the Watergate scandal and the pardon of Nixon further demonstrated a system that did not answer to the will of the people.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Killen, *1973 Nervous Breakdown*, 245.

⁸⁶ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 773-777, 781-782.

⁸⁷ “A burglary turns into a constitutional crisis,” *CNN*, June 16, 2004, accessed on July 31, 2019, http://www.cnn.com/2004/US/06/11/watergate/index.html?_s=PM:US.

⁸⁸ Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 48-49.

Americans' distrust in their government and institutions was reflected in popular culture, specifically in the realm of popular motion pictures. Many films of the era illustrate the paranoia and cynicism that Americans felt toward their government. Critically and financially successful films such as *The Parallax View* (1974) and *Chinatown* (1974) not only manifested popular political feelings of distrust and betrayal, but actively involved conspiracies in their plots. In *The Parallax View*, a reporter seeks the truth behind a political assassination only to be framed as a patsy by a nefarious conspiracy.⁸⁹ The neo-noir *Chinatown* tells the story of a private detective investigating a murder and unable to stop the forces of darkness that control 1930s Los Angeles.⁹⁰ Both films featured endings in which the protagonist is unable to expose the conspiracy lurking beneath a superficially calm surface. Other films dealt with American's feelings toward the federal institutions in terms of allegory. A controversial film released in 1973 called *Executive Action* reinterpreted the Kennedy assassination into the political and social spectrum of the 1970s and helped assassination conspiracy theories reemerge back into public view.⁹¹

Despite its attention, *Executive Action* was not the first film released to theaters that introduced American audiences to conspiracy theories. In conjunction with the release of his best-selling book, author and New York Attorney Mark Lane produced an eponymous 1967 documentary film based around his book *Rush to Judgment*. Directed by Emile de Antonio, the film maintained a similar black and white aesthetic to 1964's

⁸⁹ *The Parallax View*, directed by Alan J. Pakula (1974; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 1999), DVD.

⁹⁰ *Chinatown*, directed by Roman Polanski (1974; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2012), Blu-ray.

⁹¹ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 126-127; Killen, *1973 Nervous Breakdown*, 246-247; Wheen, *Strange Days Indeed*, 301.

Four Days in November which endorsed the findings of the Warren Commission's Report. However, *Rush to Judgment* stood antithetical to that film in content. The film featured Lane's theories on the assassination, and most notably, contained Lane's interviews with eyewitnesses who supported his central thesis that multiple assassins had shot and killed the president. Other than the eyewitness testimonies that supported conspiracy, the film featured scenes from inside Dealey Plaza, giving the audience a visual guide of the site of the assassination. Although a documentary, the film demonstrated that the Kennedy assassination narrative from the conspiracy angle could be adapted to the movie screen.⁹²

Unlike the 1967 documentary film *Rush to Judgment*, 1973's *Executive Action* offered a completely dramatized version of the Kennedy assassination as seen through the lens of paranoid conspiracy. The film featured a more robust budget and production crew than any previous effort. For example, Dalton Trumbo, a controversial left-leaning screenwriter, wrote the script for *Executive Action*. The producers of the film spared little detail on the narrative that would be constructed. Several members of the conspiracy community worked on the film as consultants, including Mark Lane, who co-wrote the story on which the film was based. Starring aging Hollywood stars Burt Lancaster and Robert Ryan, the production budget of the film was approximately one million dollars.⁹³

Although the film begins with a disclaimer specifying that its story represented fiction based on historical fact, *Executive Action* creates a portrait of the Kennedy

⁹² *Rush to Judgment*, directed by Emile de Antonio (1967; Washington D.C.: MPI Media Group, 1994), VHS. In apparent homage to Mark Lane's documentary, filmmaker Oliver Stone included several scenes in his 1991 controversial film *JFK* which replicated *Rush to Judgment's* eyewitness interviews in Dealey Plaza almost frame-by-frame.

⁹³ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 151.

assassination that neglected to differentiate between the two. The film interpolates a mixture of conspiracy sensibilities representative of both the theories first developed in the 1960s and the increasing sense of paranoia, despair, and distrust that permeated the 1970s. *Executive Action* features a group of powerful bankers, mostly older white men with conservative leanings, ordering the assassination of President Kennedy. In the film, these powerful men control all aspects of the federal government and are dissatisfied with Kennedy's role as president. They oppose Kennedy's apparent attempts at peace, mainly in diffusing the military situation in Vietnam, and his progressive and positive stance on civil rights. Over the course of several months prior to November 1963, the hidden elite, using a system of shadowy intelligence agents and hired assassins, construct a plot to assassinate the president and maintain their order over the nation.

The film contained several popular conspiracy theories that had been present in assassination literature since the early 1960s. The actual assassins present in Dealey Plaza assassinate Kennedy in a triangulated crossfire, firing from positions both behind and in front of the president's motorcade. Four shots are fired at the president's limousine. Three shots hit the president and another bullet strikes Governor Connally. The film also suggests that President Kennedy had been hit in the head twice from opposite directions. The film also presents Lee Harvey Oswald as an unsuspecting patsy framed for the murder of the president. Oswald is portrayed as a possible FBI agent led into a larger trap by deeper intelligence agencies. The conspirators transform Oswald into the assassin without his knowledge or consent. The plotters edit photographs to show Oswald with the assassin's rifle and even place an Oswald double in Dallas to further implicate him as an irate and unstable communist sympathizer. Oswald is later eliminated by Jack Ruby, who

is also part of the conspiracy. The true conspirators continue to rule the country while the assassins were filtered out of the country. The film ended with a card displaying the photographs of eighteen material witnesses to the assassination who died under mysterious circumstances.

Although reportedly a work of fiction, the film also assimilated new dynamics to the conspiracy theories around the assassination that reflected the era in which the film was made. *Executive Action* essentially represented an interpretation of the Kennedy Assassination in a post-1960s America. The movie also demonstrated the influence Jim Garrison's theories had on the evolving assassination narrative. The film suggested an enormously intricate plot, including the involvement of many individuals and a variety of components. It suggests the real benefactors of the assassination operated on a level unseen by the American people and above any government agency and law. The conspirators represented the military-industrial complex utilizing their power to ensure conflict in Southeast Asia. An important aspect of opposition to Kennedy revolves around the president's stance on civil rights. While President Kennedy is shown as sympathetic and supportive of the struggle for African American equality, the shadow elite, who engineer the assassination in Dallas, harbor intensely racist viewpoints to not only stifle the equality movement but to institute population control. *Executive Action* incorporated Garrison's prosecution and his portrait of Oswald as a victim of the intelligence community. A key point in framing Oswald concerns having Oswald hand out pro-Castro leaflets in the streets of New Orleans to establish a cover. The conspirators also utilize the press to cover their own actions.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ *Executive Action*, directed by David Miller (1973; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007), DVD.

The contents and implications of the film proved explosive upon release in late November 1973, in time for the tenth anniversary of the assassination. When released to theaters, critics both praised and criticized *Executive Action*. Although initially supportive of the Warren Commission explanation of events, *The New York Times* issued a positive review of the film, applauding the film for its mixture of both fact and fiction.⁹⁵ However, other critics reacted less enthusiastically. Writing for the *Chicago Sun Times*, movie critic Roger Ebert felt "...there's something exploitative and unseemly in the way this movie takes the real blood and anguish and fits it neatly into a semi-documentary thriller."⁹⁶ The film generated a large amount of controversy. Major television networks refused to air advertisements for *Executive Action*.⁹⁷

Executive Action represented a watershed moment in the memorialization of the president's assassination and in its synthesis of popular conspiracy theories toward the president's murder. The events of Dealey Plaza still resonated deeply in the hearts and minds of the American public even ten years after November 22, 1963. The shifting assassination narrative dramatized a battle between moral right and the corrupt. *Executive Action* portrayed Kennedy as a force of good, extinguished by dark and evil men in higher places. The film also wove together both reenactment and actual footage of events to create a more immersive visual experience.⁹⁸ The feelings of the early 1970s became inseparable from the fading memories of the initial event. The Kennedy assassination

⁹⁵ Nora Sayre, "Suspense Film Dramatizes Kennedy Assassination: The Cast," *The New York Times*, November 8, 1973, 60.

⁹⁶ Roger Ebert, "Executive Action, November 20, 1973," *Reviews*, accessed on July 30, 2019, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/executive-action-1973>.

⁹⁷ Louis Calta, "NBC Sued On Ads For Kennedy Film," *The New York Times*, 48. NBC claimed the film's violence did not meet their standards. Other networks such as ABC or CBS told the film's producer that all advertisement slots were booked.

⁹⁸ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 151.

metamorphized into a modern tale of William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and further blurred the lines between fact and fiction.

Frames of Reference

While fictional motion pictures helped to further engrain the idea of conspiracy into the minds of millions of Americans, to many in the researcher community, the most persuasive evidence of a conspiracy in the Kennedy assassination remained the physical visual document of the president's murder. Although the Zapruder film had been available as an illegal copy of inferior resolution prior to 1975, an amateur researcher named Robert J. Groden possessed a higher quality version of the film and was ready to go public with it by 1973. The efforts of Groden, with his copy of the Zapruder film, joined in a growing chorus for reinvestigation into the Kennedy murder that eventually initiated federal reaction.

Robert Groden held a very personal connection to President Kennedy's death. Groden's eighteenth birthday coincided with the president's assassination and he quickly gained interest in studying the events that occurred in Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963. By the time he turned twenty-four in 1969, Groden started working as an entry-level optical effects technician at EHX Unlimited in New York. The young photo technician developed a benevolent working relationship with EHX Unlimited founder Mo Weitzman. Groden's friendship with Weitzman led Groden to what he perceived as absolute photographic proof of conspiracy in the Kennedy assassination.⁹⁹

Weitzman revealed to Groden that he possessed a 35mm copy of the Abraham Zapruder film. In 1967, Time-Life Inc. contracted Weitzman to produce a 35mm copy of

⁹⁹ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 201-202; Wrone, *The Zapruder Film*, 65.

the film. The corporation initially doubted if such an action could be accomplished. However, Weitzman overcame the perceived technical limitations and created an enhanced blow-up of the original Zapruder film. He produced a copy of the film significantly clearer than any previous reproduction of the controversial home movie. Knowing Groden's interest in the Kennedy assassination, Weitzman allowed Groden to view the pristine copy. However, viewing the film only whetted Groden's appetite for a further examination of the contents of the film. He eventually appropriated a copy of Weitzman's version of the Zapruder film through dubious and unclear circumstances.¹⁰⁰

Unlike the assassination researchers whose access to the Zapruder film stemmed from the Warren Commission volumes or degenerated bootleg copies made during the Clay Shaw trial, Groden now possessed a superior first-generation copy of the film. Using various optical enhancement techniques, Groden created several unique edits of the Zapruder film that he felt proved conspiracy in the Kennedy assassination. He utilized close-up and stabilization on specific points in the film that assassination researchers had mulled over for nearly ten years. Groden believed his version of the Zapruder Film proved beyond a reasonable doubt that more than one assassin fired on the president in Dealey Plaza.¹⁰¹

Groden isolated two distinct areas of the Zapruder film and studied them using his background in photo analysis and the technology at his disposal. First, Groden examined the group of frames from the controversial film showing President Kennedy and Governor Connally allegedly being wounded by the same bullet. Groden believed his

¹⁰⁰ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 199-200, 202.

¹⁰¹ Anson, "They've Killed the President!", 84; Robert J. Groden, "A New Look at the Zapruder Film," in *Government by Gunplay: Assassination Conspiracy Theories from Dallas to Today*, ed. Sid Blumenthal and Harvey Yazijian (New York: Signet, 1976), 3; Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 137.

version of the film proved that both men were wounded at separate times, destroying the Warren Commission's single-bullet theory. He also focused on the fatal head shot to the president. Groden felt the 35mm copy he possessed clearly showed the president impacted by two bullets from the now-infamous Grassy Knoll, which then caused the dramatic and violent movement of the president's head and body backwards. Aside from the grisly and graphic imagery, he believed his analysis revealed the physical presence of assassins in the film itself. In frames 407-413, Groden isolated what he believed to be the head of an assassin hidden behind a group of bushes in front of Zapruder's filming location. He also believed the shape of a rifle barrel was visible through the foliage.¹⁰²

Despite these supposed revelations, Groden's theories regarding the assassination represented little more than a rehash of previous conspiracy theories in the president's death. He simply parroted the same arguments posited against the Warren Commission, including attacking the single-bullet theory and the direction of shots. Other researchers had utilized the contents of the Zapruder Film to develop their theories starting in the mid-1960s. However, the significance of the 35mm Weitzman copy of the Zapruder film that Groden possessed proved indispensable to the future development of conspiracy acceptance. When Groden acquired his copy of the film in the early 1970s, the film remained unseen by most of the general public. The amateur photo analyst utilized the shocking clarity of the images to drive the conspiracy narrative.¹⁰³ This copy of the film not only refocused how the American people would see the Zapruder film but also how they interpreted the events depicted in its frames on a deeper level.

¹⁰² Groden, "A New Look at the Zapruder Film," 4-5, 8-9.

¹⁰³ Jerry Organ, *Groden's Grains: How One Conspiracy Theorist Tried to Monopolize and Distort the Kennedy Assassination Photographic Record* (Halifax: self-published, 1997), 2; Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 203.

Although initially reluctant and deeply apprehensive about presenting the film to a wider audience, by 1973, Groden relented.¹⁰⁴ He allowed a handful of assassination researchers to see the edits of the film he had been working on including Harold Weisberg and David Lifton. These researchers encouraged Groden to show the film at a variety of assassination related conferences starting in November 1973. By 1975, the 35mm print of the Zapruder Film received extensive attention. Crowds flocked to assassination symposiums to catch a glimpse of the film that proved a conspiracy killed President Kennedy. Viewings of the film made Groden a celebrity in the assassination community.¹⁰⁵ After seeing Groden's version of the film and recognizing its importance to the conspiracy movement, popular comedian and social activist Dick Gregory invited Groden to tour the country with him. Gregory wanted to use the film as a means of convincing the general public that the assassination was the result of an extensive coup orchestrated by the CIA.¹⁰⁶

Coverage of Groden's version of the Zapruder film also led to congressional interest. During the time that a superior copy of the Zapruder film was being peddled as evidence of conspiracy at assassination conferences around the country, President Gerald Ford created the United States President's Commission on CIA Activities within the United States in early 1975. Headed by Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, the commission investigated alleged abuses and conduct by the CIA including unwarranted surveillance and experiments in mind control.¹⁰⁷ The commission also studied aspects of

¹⁰⁴ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 136.

¹⁰⁵ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 204.

¹⁰⁶ Wrone, *The Zapruder Film*, 68-69.

¹⁰⁷ John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, "The Rockefeller Commission, the White House, and CIA Assassination Plots," *National Security Archive*, accessed on July 30, 2019, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/intelligence/2016-02-29/gerald-ford-white-house-altered-rockefeller-commission-report>.

the Kennedy assassination and how the CIA may have been involved. On February 4, 1975, Groden screened his version of the Zapruder film before the commission as evidence of a cover-up.¹⁰⁸

The watershed moment of Groden's association with the Zapruder film, one that would see the film completely exposed to public viewing occurred on March 6, 1975, when Groden's version of the Zapruder film appeared on national television. By this point, the media clamor around the film grew to intense heights. The producers of a late-night American Broadcasting Company (ABC) program entitled "Goodnight America" approached Groden, asking to screen the film on their show. ABC executives asked permission from Time-Life Inc. to show the film, but the offer was refused. Ignoring the possibility of legal action from Time-Life, the network made the decision to air the Zapruder film anyway.¹⁰⁹

In a scene remarkably like Jim Garrison's sensational exposition of Zapruder's home movie during the Clay Shaw Trial, the Zapruder film hit the mainstream. Appearing with Dick Gregory, Groden presented Zapruder's unfortunate record of the assassination to a shocked television audience. Groden narrated the action as the film played, describing when the occupants of the limousine were hit and from what directions. The fatal headshot to President Kennedy, with its violent image of the president rocketed backward as if shot from the front, elicited audible gasps of shock and horror from observers live in-studio. The program showed another edit of Groden's version of the Zapruder film. This version displayed a stabilized and extreme close-up of the fatal shot which enveloped the president's head in a halo of blood and brain matter.

¹⁰⁸ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 205-206.

¹⁰⁹ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 206-207.

Before cutting to commercial, host Geraldo Rivera exclaimed, “it’s the most upsetting thing I’ve ever seen.”¹¹⁰

Following the broadcast of “Goodnight America,” the Zapruder family threatened to sue both ABC and Time-Life for their unauthorized negligence in reproduction and handling of the film. In a bold move to avoid any further legal actions, Time-Life sold the copyright, including the camera original film, back to representatives of the Zapruder family, under the name LMH Company, for one dollar.¹¹¹ Although the film had lost value to Time-Life amid the controversy, conspiracy theorists continued to use the film as a means of profit in the years following Groden’s unauthorized debut of the provocative home movie that captured the president’s murder in horrifying detail. Groden made a substantial financial and personal gain from his association with the Zapruder film and the Kennedy assassination, charging collegiate venues several thousand dollars for lectures and appearing in numerous assassination related media productions.¹¹²

The airing of the Zapruder film on national television sent shock waves throughout the public consciousness. For the first time in nearly twelve years, the Zapruder film achieved public visibility. The fact the film had been restricted from public view led to suspicions of intentional suppression. Motivations included profit and limiting knowledge of the contents of the film.¹¹³ Many viewers at home, who crowded around their television sets to see the elusive film for the first time, felt the Zapruder film, complete with Groden’s enhanced close-up of the fatal shot to President Kennedy,

¹¹⁰ Geraldo Rivera, “Goodnight America,” ABC, March 6, 1975, in *Image of an Assassination*, directed by H.D. Hotyl (1998; Washington D.C.: MPI Media Group, 1998), DVD.

¹¹¹ Wrone, *The Zapruder Film*, 69-72.

¹¹² Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 202-203, 210.

¹¹³ Anson, “*They’ve Killed the President!*”, 85; Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 136.

offered undeniable proof the assassination was the product of a conspiracy. The Zapruder film's debut on "Goodnight America" created a firestorm of public outcry and interest.¹¹⁴

The graphic imagery of the Zapruder's home movie colored the public perception of the Kennedy assassination. The visceral power of the film proved too hard to ignore. The scenes contained within its twenty-six seconds of horror provided a narrative that reflected America's turbulent journey from the 1960s into the 1970s. In the early frames of the film, as the motorcade traveled down Elm Street, the occupants of the presidential limousine smiled and waved, as did the throngs of people who lined the sidewalks to see them. This calm setting gave way to an uncontrollable series of events and a horrific denouement, the president under fire and mortally wounded. Gunfire echoed from all locations. Confusion dominated and allowed the real culprits to slip into the shadows of history. The Zapruder film transformed from a historical document into an allegory for the current state of the country with conspiracy inescapably woven into its fabric.¹¹⁵

Coupled with over ten years of cries of conspiracy and pleas for re-investigation, these efforts forced the federal government finally to act. By the middle of the 1970s, nearly nine out of ten Americans disagreed with the Warren Commission's assessment that President Kennedy's murder had been the result of one gunman. The focus on the "who" of the assassination, as championed by influential assassination magnets such as Jim Garrison, added a new dynamic of doubt. Garrison, and the critics that followed, viewed the assassination as a fairy tale invented to protect the true plotters behind the Kennedy assassination but also the architects of the cover story that kept the assassins hidden. Americans not only derided the official explanation but also felt the conspiracy

¹¹⁴ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 207.

¹¹⁵ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 127.

included parts of their own government. The call for reinvestigation in the wake of the political turmoil of the 1970s could no longer be ignored. A new investigation into the president's murder became an imminent reality and the truth once again seemed attainable. The gunshots of Dealey Plaza continued to echo out.

III. Conspiracy of One (1975-1982)

The shots hit their marks. A rifle barrel visibly extended from one of the southeast windows on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository Building. The loud crack of gunshots reverberated between the tall buildings of Dealey Plaza and down onto Elm Street. Another rifleman took aim from the corner of the stockade fence on the Grassy Knoll. He fired at the street below and hit the targets. Other than the sound of gunfire, Dealey Plaza remained quiet and suspiciously without traffic or crowds. The small park in the middle of downtown Dallas appeared eerily frozen in time.

The above scene played out not in 1963, but in 1978 as Dealey Plaza became the site of another shooting; however, this shooting left no human casualties. Late that year, the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA), a congressional committee investigating the murder of President Kennedy, conducted firing tests in Dealey Plaza after discovering a potentially groundbreaking piece of auditory evidence that had previously been overlooked in the assassination. Four piles of sandbags traced the route of the president's motorcade that passed through Dealey Plaza. The targets were placed where shots were believed to have hit during the president's assassination in November 1963. Sophisticated microphones also lined both Houston and Elm Streets and recorded the shots from both the Texas School Book Depository and the Grassy Knoll. The test teams fired a 6.5mm Mannlicher Carcano rifle from the alleged sniper's nest on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository. Scientists also recorded the sounds from an identical rifle and a .38 caliber pistol fired from the location of the Grassy Knoll. The

shooting continued until the team had accrued over four hundred individual results for scientific study.¹

The firing tests conducted by the HSCA in Dealey Plaza represented only one part of a federal reinvestigation into President Kennedy's murder, a task borne out of public disillusionment in both the Warren Commission's findings and a growing lack of faith in government institutions. Founded in an era of intense paranoia and soaring public belief in conspiracies, the HSCA attempted to set the record straight on the assassination once and for all. The efforts of the HSCA's investigation, including the 1978 tests conducted in Dealey Plaza, marked a crucial turning point in the assassination narrative. The effects of the investigation changed the official government narrative on the murder of John F. Kennedy and provided conspiracy theories with further exposure.

Prelude to the House Select Committee on Assassinations

By 1975, the federal government found itself in a strikingly uncomfortable situation concerning President Kennedy's assassination. The political and social climate of the country remained in a heightened state of distrust and unrest. Attitudes toward the American military involvement in Southeast Asia had polarized the country. Due to a collection of highly public exposés, trust in governmental institutions dwindled dramatically by the mid-1970s. The release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 demonstrated that the Department of Defense had both lied about and prolonged the Vietnam War. Resentment built in the disclosure that the American military seemed willing to sacrifice thousands of lives and millions of dollars for an unwinnable war. Also, the Watergate

¹ United States, Congress, U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations, U.S. House of Representatives, Ninety-fifth Congress, Second Session* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979; reprint, Ipswich: Mary Farrell Foundation Press, 2007), 68-70.

scandal changed American attitudes about the federal government. In August 1974, President Richard Nixon resigned from the presidency following the revelation he had engaged in criminal activity and obstructed justice. The fact that the highest office of the executive branch could be corrupted to such extent angered the public. The turbulent era of the 1960s and 1970s helped lay the foundation for conspiracy theories to grow in popular thought.²

Aside from more high-profile political figures, the CIA became a popular target for conspiracy theorists.³ Investigation by two Congressional panels in the early 1970s exposed participation of United States intelligence agencies in illegal clandestine operations both throughout the world and inside the United States since the end of the Second World War. The so-called Church Committee, named after Idaho Senator and chairman Frank Church, found the CIA actively carried political coups and assassinations in foreign countries. The committee also found that responsibility for many of these clandestine actions had been cloaked in ambiguity and could not be effectively traced to executive decisions. The committee uncovered CIA operations of political subterfuge in foreign countries functioned under the guise of “plausible deniability,” in which links to the CIA or the United States government remained hidden from exposure.⁴ Another congressional investigation head by Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, dubbed the Rockefeller Commission, found the CIA had been as tyrannical in their actions at home as abroad. The commission concluded the CIA unlawfully spied and collected

² Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 253-254.

³ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 255.

⁴ United States, Congress, U.S. Senate, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders: An Interim Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, United States Senate, Together with Additional, Supplemental, and Separate Views* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 1, 7-8, 11-12.

information on Americans. The commission also explored implicating CIA involvement in the assassination of President Kennedy including rumors generated by conspiracy theorists that linked both Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby to U.S. intelligence.⁵ The disclosure that elements of the intelligence community had operated outside lawful boundaries and official speculation that potentially connected government activities to the Kennedy assassination fueled further conspiracy mongering. These revelations also demonstrated to Americans the intense level of secrecy and subterfuge that lurked under the surface of the federal government. In this volatile climate, the question of conspiracy in the Kennedy assassination resurfaced.⁶

Other factors brought Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories into popular discussion during the mid-1970s. The debut of the controversial Zapruder film on national television by conspiracy theorist Robert Groden in March 1975 sparked intense debate. The public demanded an answer to the shocking and visceral content of the 8mm home movie that appeared to show the president had been fatally shot from an opposite direction as claimed by the Warren Commission.⁷ The fact that the film had been under the ownership of Time-Life, Inc. for nearly twelve years also led to claims the evidence was purposely hidden away from public viewing.⁸ Public outcry for an explanation increased as belief in conspiracy claims surrounding the assassination catapulted to levels previously unseen. According to a Cambridge Survey poll in 1975, nearly four out of five Americans felt that Lee Harvey Oswald had not acted alone in murdering President

⁵ United States, U.S. Department of State, *Report to the President by the Commission on CIA Activities Within the United States* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 9, 251-269.

⁶ Peter Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 68-69.

⁷ Richard B. Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film* (Danvers: Yeoman Press, 2005), 207-208.

⁸ Robert Sam Anson, *"They've Killed the President!": The Search for the Murderers of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Bantam, 1975), 3, 360.

Kennedy.⁹ A Gallup poll taken the following year demonstrated over eighty percent of Americans believed in a conspiracy.¹⁰ Rumors of conspiracy, now infiltrating all corners of American thought, forced the federal government to act.

In the wake of pressing events, the Kennedy assassination research community emerged from the shadows. Shaking off the dust from the Garrison investigation in the late 1960s, the conspiracy community flooded the market with publications. With all eyes on the discretions of the federal government, the Kennedy assassination theories transformed further from their original roots. Instead of a small conspiracy, as maintained by the early Warren Commission critics, the number of plotters now expanded exponentially to match changing social perceptions of government. Most publication titles released in this period featured the American intelligence community as active participants in the plotting and execution of the assassination.¹¹ The earlier claims by Jim Garrison, often derided and ridiculed by other researchers and the press, now became standard portions of the assassination narrative. The idea of a vast government conspiracy pitting the American individual against a menacing governmental state defined conspiracy thinking following the struggles of the previous decade.¹² Themes in popular conspiracy literature reflected this position.

⁹ Cambridge Survey Research, "Summer 1975," in Anson, *"They've Killed the President!"*, 3.

¹⁰ George H. Gallup, "Do you think one man was responsible for the assassination of President Kennedy, or do you think others were involved?," December 10-13, 1976, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinions 1972-1977*, vol. 2, 1976-1977 (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1978), 927.

¹¹ For examples, see: Peter F. Model and Robert J. Groden, *JFK: The Case for Conspiracy* (New York: Manor Books, Inc., 1976), J. Gary Shaw with Larry R. Harris, *Cover-Up: The Government Conspiracy to Conceal the Facts About the Public Execution of John Kennedy* (Cleburne: self-published, 1976), and Peter Dale Scott, *Crime and Cover-Up: The CIA, the Mafia, and the Dallas-Watergate Connection* (Berkeley: Westworks, 1977).

¹² Peter Knight, "Introduction: A Nation of Conspiracy Theorists," in *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, ed. Peter Knight (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 6-7.

Published in 1975 by veteran journalist Robert Sam Anson, *“They’ve Killed the President!”: The Search for the Murderers of John F. Kennedy* injected soaring popular feelings of government distrust and paranoia present in the assassination narrative by implicating the CIA. In the book’s introduction, Anson reflected on recent investigations into CIA activities, “Painfully, still disbelievingly, we are learning that many of the men who have served under the alert eagle of the CIA’s crest have lied, cheated, stolen, suborned, maimed, and murdered to achieve their ends. We are finding also that there is no effective control over this ‘invisible government.’”¹³ Anson further expanded the CIA’s image as negligent criminals by widening the scope of the conspiracy. He postulated that United States intelligence agencies formed an alliance with organized crime to assure the president’s murder in Dallas on November 22, 1963. According to Anson, Oswald had been connected to intelligence and set up as a patsy. Echoing other critics of the official narrative, Anson believed the CIA and FBI deliberately withheld from the Warren Commission evidence that implicated others in the crime.¹⁴

Anson’s book not only added the intelligence element into the conspiracy narrative but also functioned as a retrospective analysis of Kennedy assassination research. He critiqued and outlined the first decade of opposition to the lone gunman hypothesis. Writing on the Warren Commission, Anson characterized the members of the commission and its staff as “the establishment itself.” The book praised the efforts of early critics such as Mark Lane, Sylvia Meagher, and Josiah Thompson, treating them as modern folk heroes for truth and justice. The book, though, chastised the Jim Garrison investigation as a charade and debacle. Anson even questioned Garrison’s motives and

¹³ Anson, *“They’ve Killed the President!”*, 5.

¹⁴ Anson, *“They’ve Killed the President!”*, 7, 12.

noted his apparent connections to organized crime. Even in the light of recent events, Anson mirrored the attitude of the early critics in believing that a reinvestigation into the president's murder could set the record straight. To critics such as Anson, there still existed the chance to recover the integrity of a tarnished governmental structure in the name of justice and righteousness.¹⁵ Even during an era of severe distrust in federal institutions, several critics still held to the belief that the truth of the assassination was still attainable and the fundamental structure of government could be salvaged.

Conspiracy theories also manifested themselves dramatically in the second wave of assassination literature. In contrast to other works, *Appointment in Dallas: The Final Solution to the Assassination of JFK* (1975) resembled a convoluted and paranoid spy thriller. The book demonstrated the murky level of credibility that existed in the realm of assassination research. Although written by author Geoffrey Bocca, the actual story originated from a former Chief of Detectives for the Los Angeles County Police Department named Hugh C. McDonald. McDonald told Bocca that he had encountered a professional assassin who went by the pseudonym of "Saul."¹⁶ According to McDonald's account to Bocca, "Saul" confessed that he was one of the shooters who killed Kennedy in Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963.¹⁷ According to "Saul," two shooters fired on President Kennedy's limousine from the buildings behind the president including the Texas School Book Depository. Unlike other accounts by conspiracy theorists, "Saul" claimed no assassin fired at the president's motorcade from the Grassy Knoll. In fact, Bocca used evidence from the Warren Commission's report to support the claims of the

¹⁵ Anson, "They've Killed the President!", 41, 71-94, 126-127, 358-361.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Bocca, *Appointment in Dallas: The Final Solution to the Assassination of JFK* (New York: Pinnacle Books, 1975), 6-7.

¹⁷ Bocca, *Appointment in Dallas*, 171.

self-confessed assassin. “Saul” claimed that Oswald was involved in the conspiracy and fired at the president from the Texas School Book Depository Building. An appendix to the book also stated McDonald’s belief that the Warren Commission’s assessment of the shooting in Dealey Plaza was mostly correct. This acceptance of portions of the Warren Commission’s hypothesis concerning the ballistics of the assassination represented an anomaly in conspiracy material. However, Bocca claimed that the commission had been duped by a planted bullet that later factored into the commission’s controversial single-bullet theory.¹⁸

Despite its status as a best-seller, *Appointment in Dallas* offered little supporting evidence other than the third-hand testimony of McDonald. Yet the book represented a turning point in conspiracy literature. In the same vein in which motion pictures had interpreted the Kennedy Assassination, *Appointment in Dallas* marked a point where fact and fiction collided in an entertaining and white-knuckle narrative that sacrificed historical basis and evidentiary analysis. The book also demonstrated that the idea of conspiracy in the Kennedy assassination no longer concerned the objective pursuit of tangible evidence. The overall idea of conspiracy in American history and contemporary events became commonplace and unquestioned by this period.¹⁹ Audiences read books such as *Appointment in Dallas* and overlooked the dubious quality of evidence in favor of a wholesale belief that made the Kennedy assassination synonymous with conspiracy. The dramatic content of the narrative offered apparent confirmation of a larger and intricate plot and superseded the importance of substantial proof. An ethos of conspiracy had emerged in the culture.

¹⁸ Bocca, *Appointment in Dallas*, 160, 169-171, 174-178, 181-183.

¹⁹ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 127.

By the mid-1970s, the assassination had become a defining event in a long line of government transgressions. Many Americans linked the assassination of President Kennedy to other high-profile political events such as the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy.²⁰ *Government by Gunplay: Assassination Conspiracy Theories from Dallas to Today* (1976) explored similar politically motivated territory. Edited by Sid Blumenthal and Harvey Yazijian, this collection of articles connected the assassination to the events of the 1960s and 1970s. The gathering of material from different authors in the conspiracy movement created a portrait of the assassination as instrumental in a hidden power struggle for the soul of the country. The articles contained within *Government by Gunplay* took claims of government involvement in the assassination to extremes. They linked the assassination of President Kennedy to the CIA, FBI, military-industrial complex, organized crime, and elite billionaires. The book also made claims that the Warren Commission functioned as part of the conspiracy by manufacturing a cover story to hide the identities of the real assassins.²¹

Government by Gunplay acted as a microcosm of 1970s paranoia concerning the Kennedy assassination. Much like the earlier claims of Jim Garrison, the tentacles of the conspiracy reached into every facet of the federal government and beyond. Everything involving the assassination event had been transformed into an element of a nefarious and evil plot. Anything official or governmental reeked of corruption and involvement. The previous belief that the conspiracy had been the result of a small cabal of individuals

²⁰ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 127. For an example, see Harold Weisberg, *Frame-Up: The Martin Luther King-James Earl Ray Case* (New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1971).

²¹ Sid Blumenthal, forward to *Government by Gunplay: Assassination Conspiracy Theories from Dallas to Today*, ed. Sid Blumenthal and Harvey Yazijian (New York: Signet, 1976), ix-x.

evaporated. The earlier accusations of the 1960s, that a local, right-wing conspiracy may have been responsible for President Kennedy's murder, were replaced by the edifice of the federal government in the wake of events of the 1970s. The participants in this large and growing conspiracy embodied a direct enemy in keeping the truth from the American people.²²

The flow of literature concerning the Kennedy assassination in the mid-1970s showed that the American public's perception of the assassination had shifted drastically since the latter half of the previous decade. Sensationalism, suspicion, and obsession defined the new leads in assassination research. The search for hard evidence took a backseat to intense speculation involving rampant political misdeeds. Instead of focusing on the works of earlier critics, the second wave of Kennedy assassination researchers accepted the conspiracy as a given. They no longer needed refutation of single-bullets nor analysis of split-seconds of film to establish their claim of conspiracy. The proverbial smoking gun no longer needed to be present in Dealey Plaza. The so-called concrete evidence of conspiracy existed in the turbulent events since President Kennedy's death. The events of the 1970s, such as the collapse of the Vietnam War, Watergate, and exposés on the United States intelligence community, severely damaged governmental credibility. Instead of searching photographs for assassins on the Grassy Knoll, conspiracists started looking for them in the buildings and institutions of Washington D.C. while still calling on their government to reinvestigate the crime of the century.²³

²² Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 53-54.

²³ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 90-91.

The House Select Committee on Assassinations

Although a re-examination of the evidence in the Kennedy assassination had been downplayed and mostly ignored by Congress in the early-to-mid 1970s, not all hope for a legitimate congressional investigation had been lost. The public outpouring of dissatisfaction with the findings of the Warren Commission Report, upon which the conspiracists had been building for more than a decade, coupled with the televised debut of Abraham Zapruder's shocking home movie of the president's murder aired in March 1975, pressured governmental authorities into reopening the case in an official context.²⁴ In September 1976, the United States government finally relented to both public and political pressure by responding directly to the Warren Commission critics' call for reinvestigation. Based on resolutions submitted by Democratic Congressmen Thomas Downing of Virginia and Henry B. Gonzalez of Texas, the House of Representatives formed the House Select Committee on Assassinations. The committee would not only reinvestigate the assassination of President Kennedy, but also the murder of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Despite Downing's impending retirement, Congress selected him as the committee chairman due to his vocal efforts in founding the committee. In January 1977, the ninety-fifth Congress of the United States dismissed Downing and appointed Congressman Henry B. Gonzalez of Texas as its chairman. Besides Congressman Gonzalez, eleven other members were selected to constitute the HSCA panel.²⁵

²⁴ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 207-208.

²⁵ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 233; U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 9-10, 534-536.

Despite the apparent forward momentum of a thorough investigation intended to set right the apparent wrongs of the Warren Commission in the eyes of conspiracists and the general American public, the HSCA encountered upheaval and infighting from its genesis. Budgetary and administrative issues plagued the early phases of the congressional investigation. Gonzalez felt resentful of Congress' initial appointment of Downing as chairman of the committee despite Downing's status as a lame-duck. Another significant point of contention concerned the inclusion of Philadelphia attorney Richard Sprague as chief counsel for the HSCA. Sprague accepted the job under the assumption he would have complete control over the investigation.²⁶ As chief counsel, Sprague focused on CIA ties to President Kennedy's assassination.²⁷ Appearing before the House of Representatives in February 1977, Sprague urged Congress to allot thirteen million dollars to facilitate the investigation.²⁸ Under pressure from prominent media sources such as *The Washington Post*, Chairman Gonzalez attempted to dismiss Sprague from the congressional probe, only to be rebuked by the committee's eleven other members.²⁹

Following this political altercation with the other members of the committee and concerns over budgetary expenditures, an embittered Gonzalez resigned as chairman of the committee in February 1977. Ohio congressman Louis Stokes replaced Gonzalez.³⁰

²⁶ Gaeton Fonzi, *The Last Investigation: What Insiders Know About the Assassination of JFK* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 1993), 176. Fonzi's book detailed his time as an investigator for the HSCA. Although his biases lean toward conspiracy, Fonzi provides a unique first-hand account of the inner workings of the committee.

²⁷ Fonzi, *The Last Investigation*, 195-197.

²⁸ Richard L. Madden, "House Votes to Keep Assassination Panel After Sprague Quits," *The New York Times*, March 31, 1977, A13.

²⁹ Fonzi, *The Last Investigation*, 182-183; Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 233-234.

³⁰ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 233; United States, Congress, U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations*, 10, 494-495.

Sprague continued as chief counsel for the committee but resigned in March.³¹ In late June 1977, Chairman Stokes appointed attorney G. Robert Blakey as chief counsel.³² Blakey quickly reconstituted the aim of the investigation, focusing less on the involvement of American intelligence agencies in the president's murder (as Sprague had) and steered the committee toward leads that involved Oswald and Ruby's connections to organized crime figures that the Justice Department had targeted during the Kennedy administration.³³

Following the resignation of Gonzalez in early 1977 and the replacement of Sprague by Blakey, assassination conspiracists' opinions quickly soured toward the congressional investigation. The conspiracists viewed the HSCA as a governmental tool of subversion aimed at protecting both the Warren Commission's "lone gunman" hypothesis and the nefarious internal intelligence organizations that had allegedly perpetrated and covered up the crime.³⁴ The general public shared the feelings of distrust that conspiracy theorists active in the research community held toward the committee. When Mark Lane lectured to a crowd of six thousand college students at Purdue University, an audience member stated that the government should not reinvestigate the Kennedy murder because they could not be trusted.³⁵ Despite an overwhelming public belief in conspiracy representative in opinion polls, the public simply did not trust governmental institutions to reveal the truth in the wake of the turbulent events of the 1960s and early-to-mid 1970s.

³¹ Madden, "House Votes to Keep Assassination Panel After Sprague Quits," 1.

³² Wendell Rawls Jr., "Cornell Professor Is Named as Assassinations Panel Counsel," *The New York Times*, June 21, 1977, 21.

³³ Fonzi, *The Last Investigation*, 229, 255-256.

³⁴ Wendell Rawls, Jr., "House Inquiry Reported Fruitless On Kennedy-King Assassinations," *The New York Times*, June 6, 1977, 1, 20.

³⁵ Anson, "*They've Killed the President!*", 337.

Despite conspiracists' claims that the HSCA functioned as little more than an adjunct confirmation of the Warren Commission Report, the committee focused directly on claims of conspiracy despite the fact that many of these claims had been ignored outright by the Warren Commission. Although operating under strict silence to protect the integrity of their activities, the HSCA addressed many of the conspiracists' theories head-on by focusing on areas of intense contention and speculation that had commanded the conspiracy debate for nearly fifteen years. They also concentrated on the scientific evidence, including ballistics, the assassination's photographic record, and the medical evidence.³⁶

The committee conducted new ballistics tests to assess conspiracy claims, specifically those revolving around the Zapruder film. Conspiracists maintained a critical study of the Zapruder film rendered the single-assassin hypothesis untenable.³⁷ They maintained superior copies of the film seemed to show President Kennedy and Governor Connally being struck by separate bullets, and that the film also graphically demonstrated the president's head snap backward as if shot from the front. The conspiracists asserted the Warren Commission's study of the Zapruder film had been wholly inadequate and, in some regards, even disingenuous. New technology and findings, including a 1975 study of the controversial home movie by ITEK Inc., a Massachusetts photo enhancement firm, presented the committee with a new opportunity to analyze and address any issues conspiracists had with earlier interpretations of the film.³⁸

³⁶ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 18-19.

³⁷ For an analysis of the Zapruder film from a conspiracy standpoint, see Robert J. Groden, "A New Look at the Zapruder Film," in *Government by Gunplay: Assassination Conspiracies from Dallas to Today*, ed. Sid Blumenthal and Harvey Yazijian (New York: Signet, 1976).

³⁸ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 239. It should be noted that ITEK also scientifically analyzed the Orville Nix film of President Kennedy's assassination in 1967 and found no evidence supporting a conspiracy.

The committee's analysis of the Zapruder film found the contents of the film supported the Warren Commission's findings. The committee's study, though, contained variances from the Warren Commission on the issues of the single-bullet theory and the head snap visible following the fatal shot at Zapruder frame 313. The committee's experts found the Warren Commission's assessment for when the controversial single bullet had been fired was incorrect. Instead, the committee felt President Kennedy had been hit twenty frames prior to the Warren Commission's estimate of Frame 210, therefore changing the timing. Study of the film seemed to indicate President Kennedy reacted to a noise or some external stimulus around Zapruder frame 190. The HSCA also supported this claim with trajectory analysis that indicated the shot originated from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository Building.³⁹ However, in moving the timeline of the single-bullet theory backward, they did little to explain Governor Connally's actions besides endorsing the Warren Commission's conclusion Connally had experienced a delayed reaction to being shot.⁴⁰

The committee also utilized the Zapruder film to study the movement of the president's head following the fatal headshot at Zapruder frame 313. In its report, the Warren Commission largely sidestepped the issue of the violent head-snap visible in the controversial home movie.⁴¹ Conspiracy theorists criticized the commission for

³⁹ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 45-48.

⁴⁰ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 46; Fonzi, *The Last Investigation*, 20-21. In his book, Fonzi relates a personal anecdote involving a meeting with Arlen Specter, former staff member for the Warren Commission and architect of the single-bullet theory, in which Specter struggles in explaining the apparent discrepancies between the wounding of President Kennedy and Governor Connally in the Zapruder film.

⁴¹ United States, The President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy, *The Warren Report on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1964); reprint Garden City: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1964), 86-87.

publishing the crucial frames of the president's headshot out of sequence in its volumes.⁴²

The forensic and medical panel of the HSCA concluded that the movement of President Kennedy's head seen after the fatal impact at frame 313 resulted from a neuro-muscular reaction to a shot from behind. They partially based this conclusion upon studying shooting experiments performed on live goats.⁴³

Forensic analysis provided little credence to the claims of the conspiracists. Neutron activation analysis linked bullet fragments recovered from the limousine to the Warren Commission's controversial pristine bullet.⁴⁴ Photographic study of the backyard photographs of Oswald with the murder weapons revealed the images to be genuine and not doctored or retouched to frame Oswald, as conspiracy theorists had claimed.⁴⁵ The committee found the medical evidence, including the testimony of the emergency personnel at Parkland Hospital, supported the lone-gunman hypothesis. The autopsy photographs and x-rays had been also authenticated as genuine and showed all shots had originated from behind President Kennedy.⁴⁶ The evidentiary base on which the conspiracy theorists had constructed their case had been seriously compromised by the scientific efforts of the HSCA.

To make matters worse for conspiracy theorists, the HSCA publicly focused on fringe theories that damaged the credibility of the more reasonable and respected members of the research community. One of the primary fringe theories the HSCA focused their efforts on concerned a mysterious figure photographed in Dealey Plaza.

⁴² Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 178-180.

⁴³ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 43-44.

⁴⁴ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 45. Neutron activation analysis is a scientific process in which a sample is bombarded with neutrons in a nuclear reactor, making the sample radioactive. The gamma rays emitted by isotopes are then measured. This data is then compared to other samples.

⁴⁵ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 54-56.

⁴⁶ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 41-43.

Researchers dubbed him “the Umbrella Man” both because of his seemingly unusual use of a large, black umbrella on an otherwise sunny day and his proximity to President Kennedy in Dealey Plaza when the shooting occurred. Visible in films and photographs during and after the shooting, the “Umbrella Man” appeared to be spinning and pumping the umbrella up and down as the president’s motorcade passed his position. After the shooting, he calmly walked away and was never identified by law enforcement.

Focus on the actions and the identity of the so-called “Umbrella Man” escalated in the years following the assassination. Josiah Thompson mentioned him as a person of interest in *Six Seconds in Dallas* (1967).⁴⁷ However, in subsequent years, the actions of the Umbrella Man shifted from curiosity to conspiratorial. Some claimed the Umbrella Man was part of the conspiracy to kill President Kennedy and acting as a visual reference point to hidden shooters in Dealey Plaza. His actions of pumping the umbrella up and down signaled the assassins to continue firing at the president.⁴⁸ However, as further suspicion and distrust crept into the American consciousness, the Umbrella Man became more than an accessory to the murder of the president.

By 1975, the mystery of the Umbrella Man deepened. Robert Cutler, a Massachusetts architect, became fascinated with the Kennedy assassination after reading Penn Jones’s *Pardon My Greif*. Cutler noted issues with the Warren Commission’s survey of Dealey Plaza.⁴⁹ After conducting his own research, Cutler found himself unable

⁴⁷ Josiah Thompson, *Six Seconds in Dallas: A Micro-Study of the Kennedy Assassination Proving that Three Gunmen Murdered the President* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1967), 227-228.

⁴⁸ Richard B. Trask, *Pictures of the Pain: Photography and the Assassination of President Kennedy* (Danvers: Yeoman Press, 1994), 173.

⁴⁹ R.B. Cutler, *The Umbrella Man: Evidence of Conspiracy* (Beverly Farms: self-published, 1975), 6-10. Cutler is also noted for producing a grassroots assassination publication entitled *The Grassy Knoll Gazette* that ran for twenty volumes. According to author Richard Trask, Cutler also coined the term “assassinologist” to describe researchers obsessed with the Kennedy assassination (see Robert Cutler, “The Grassy Knoll Gazette, volumes 1-20,” *BCPM – JFK – Robert Cutler Collection*, accessed September 3,

to rectify the testimony of the Parkland doctors and conspiracy theorists claiming President Kennedy was shot in the throat from the Grassy Knoll.⁵⁰ In his self-published book, *The Umbrella Man: Evidence of Conspiracy*, he put forth the radical and outlandish theory that the mysterious Umbrella Man was one of the assassins. Utilizing his training in mapmaking and mathematics, Cutler believed the only trajectory for a frontal shot to the president's throat came from the area of the Umbrella Man. Cutler postulated the Umbrella Man had used a CIA engineered gas-powered dart-gun disguised as an umbrella. Utilizing incredible accuracy, the Umbrella Man hit the president in the throat with a poison dart that paralyzed him and made him an easy target for other shooters in Dealey Plaza.⁵¹ Cutler's extraordinary theory of an umbrella-wielding assassin garnered a significant degree of media attention.⁵²

The HSCA focused their efforts on examining the Umbrella Man theory as proposed by Cutler in his book. It represented the conspiracy theory at its most imaginative and most incredulous. Using connections in Dallas, including local reporters, the HSCA interviewed the so-called Umbrella Man and identified him as a Dallas native named Louis Steven Witt.⁵³ In a widely televised meeting, Witt testified in front of the

2019, <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/po-jfkkgkaz>; Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 210.

⁵⁰ Cutler, *The Umbrella Man*, 192-195.

⁵¹ Cutler, *The Umbrella Man*, 197-200; for further elaboration on Cutler's "umbrella man" theory, see: Robert Cutler, *Seventy-Six Seconds in Dealey Plaza: Evidence of Conspiracy* (Beverly Farms, self-published, 1978).

⁵² Myra MacPherson, "Assassination Theorists," *The Washington Post*, September 9, 1978, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1978/09/09/assassination-theorists/f7da5743-5ebd-4539-b9ed-0e54dcf8808e/>.

⁵³ Earl Golz, "'Umbrella Man Identified? Panel plans to question Dallasite during JFK probe,'" *Dallas Morning News*, August 12, 1978, <http://jfk.hood.edu/Collection/Weisberg%20Subject%20Index%20Files/U%20Disk/Umbrella%20Man%20The/Item%2003.pdf>.

HSCA panel in September 1978. His testimony revealed he was not an assassin nor involved in any degree of conspiracy.⁵⁴

Witt's testimony, and the televised hearing, was not without its own degree of strangeness. According to Witt, he brought his umbrella to Dealey Plaza as a vague protest against the Kennedy family.⁵⁵ Witt also took his umbrella to the proceedings before the HSCA. In a surreal episode, the HSCA panel asked to see the now-battered black umbrella which was then lifted from the table by an aide. As the aide swung the umbrella toward the panel, Chairman Stokes jokingly asked the aide to point the umbrella the other direction. The aide also attempted to open the umbrella which promptly broke. Laughter erupted from both the panel and the chamber audience, revealing the absurdity of the original claims.⁵⁶

The conspiracy community reacted with disdain to the Witt testimony before the HSCA. Although Cutler's "umbrella man as assassin" theory had been an extreme fringe belief in the community, it reflected badly on conspiracists in the public eye. The event recalled how the early Warren Commission critics had been bunched into the same category as Jim Garrison's wild theories in the late 1960s.⁵⁷ Some conspiracy theorists believed that the exchange between Witt and the committee, particularly the umbrella opening, on national television had been engineered to make a mockery of Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories. Conspiracists such as Cutler believed that Witt was not

⁵⁴ David R. Wrone, *The Zapruder Film: Reframing JFK's Assassination* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 100; United States, Congress, U.S. House of Representatives, *Hearings Before the Select Committee on Assassinations of the U.S. House of Representatives, Ninety-Fifth Congress, Second Session, September 22, 25, and 26, 1978*, vol. 4 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), 436-438.

⁵⁵ U.S. House of Representatives, *Hearings*, vol. 4, 431.

⁵⁶ U.S. House of Representatives, *Hearings*, vol. 4., 443-444; Errol Morris, "The Umbrella Man," New York Times video, 6:36, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000001183275/the-umbrella-man.html>.

⁵⁷ Wrone, *The Zapruder Film*, 100-101.

even the real “Umbrella Man”, but an imposter meant to mislead and embarrass the conspiracy community.⁵⁸ Regardless of the authenticity of Witt’s testimony, the subject of the “Umbrella Man” demonstrated the committee did not fear taking on the most provocative of conspiracy theories.

As the HSCA entered into the final stages of its investigation, the committee prepared to issue a report with central findings identical to the Warren Commission.⁵⁹ However, a significant and sudden scientific revelation altered the committee’s verdict on President Kennedy’s assassination. Following a tip submitted by Dallas assassination researcher Gary Mack, the committee uncovered a long-forgotten audio recording taken during the president’s assassination on November 22, 1963. The recording was captured on a dictabelt, an analog device which stored audio signals using plastic belts for replay, and contained dispatch recordings from the various police motorcycles that had accompanied the presidential motorcade. Previously, the committee scientifically studied a recording taken from a live radio broadcast in Dealey Plaza at the time of the assassination. Mack and other researchers suggested the HSCA experts analyze the police dispatch recordings and search for evidence of gunshots.⁶⁰

Analysis of the dictabelt recordings taken by Dallas police yielded shocking results. One of the recordings appeared to have originated from an open microphone located in Dealey Plaza at the time of the president’s assassination. The unidentified motorcycle policeman inadvertently captured acoustical impulse evidence of the actual

⁵⁸ Robert Cutler, “The Umbrella Man? Never!,” *The Grassy Knoll Gazette* 2, no. 5 (November 1978): 2-3, accessed on September 3, 2019, <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/po-jfkkgaz/id/1165/rec/4>.

⁵⁹ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 69.

⁶⁰ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 235-236; U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 65-66. The HSCA’s analysis of the KBOX radio broadcast revealed that the recording originated after the shooting and did not contain the acoustical sounds of gunfire.

shooting. Analysis by a team of independent audio experts revealed that four impulses, representing gunshots, were captured on the dictabelt recording. This surprise finding challenged the official narrative of a lone gunman. If the single-assassin theory were correct, Oswald would have been incapable of firing four shots during the assassination due to time constraints. The dictabelt represented apparent scientific proof of a fourth shot and another gunman in Dealey Plaza beside Oswald.⁶¹

Further examination of the acoustics evidence added to the committee's quandary. Scientists performed acoustics tests using live ammunition and microphones placed in Dealey Plaza. The scientists performed their experiments from two locations, including the sixth floor of the former-Texas School Book Depository and the stockade fence on the top of the Grassy Knoll. Analysis of the HSCA's experiments indicated one of the impulses matched a shot from the Grassy Knoll within ninety-five percent probability. To the conspiracists, the HSCA's scientific examination proved a second gunman had fired at President Kennedy during his assassination. However, the HSCA experts claimed the shot from the Grassy Knoll completely missed the presidential limousine and did not impact a target.⁶² The evidence conspiracy theorists had sought for years, seemingly proving the existence of a second gunman, was not found in dismantling the Warren Commission's single-bullet theory or the graphic contents of a sensational 8mm color home movie but in a forgotten police dispatch recording.

This new evidence may have forced the HSCA to concede a second gunman was present in Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963, but issues existed concerning the

⁶¹ "House Panel Hears New Evidence Of a Fourth Shot Fired at Kennedy," *The New York Times*, December 22, 1978, B7.

⁶² U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 69-71, 74, 80.

reliability of dictabelt evidence. The committee attempted to identify the Dallas motorcycle policeman who had inadvertently made the recording when he left his microphone open and concluded the motorcycle policeman was H.B. McClain. When he testified before the HSCA, however, McClain expressed doubt that the open microphone was from his motorcycle. For the acoustics evidence to stand, McClain's motorcycle needed to be in a specific location in Dealey Plaza in order to match the impulses on the tape. Photographic proof of McClain's presence in the acoustical target area remained unclear.⁶³ The audio tape also lacked the sounds of the motorcade's frantic race to Parkland Hospital including sirens and racing motorcycles.⁶⁴ Despite these issues, the committee's scientists matched the impulses to the acoustic fingerprint of Dealey Plaza and indicating to them that shots had been fired at the presidential motorcade from two separate locations.

The HSCA had other opportunities to expand on the presence of another gunman in Dealey Plaza but failed to do so. The committee analyzed a photograph taken by Philip Willis during the president's assassination that appeared to show a dark figure behind a cement retaining wall on the Grassy Knoll. Researchers dubbed the figure the "black dog man." The committee's scientific study of the photograph determined that the figure was a human being wearing a dark coat next to an unidentified object.⁶⁵ The commission,

⁶³ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 75-79; Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 238.

⁶⁴ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 72. Knight also notes that investigators determined the tape contained the clear sound of an unidentified bell. Some researchers contend that this bell should not have been audible amongst the chaos of the assassination and its immediate aftermath.

⁶⁵ U.S. House of Representatives, *Hearings*, vol. 4, 407-41. The image of the "black dog man" also appears in a black and white photograph taken by assassination witness Hugh Betzner. Researcher Robert Groden believes the same figure is visible in films taken by Marie Muchmore and Orville Nix, see "November 22, 1963: Photos by nine bystanders," *Life*, November 24, 1967, 92-93; Robert J. Groden, *The Killing of the President: The Complete Photographic Record of the JFK Assassination, the Conspiracy, and the Cover-up* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 192-193.

though, did not follow up on this analysis or attempt to identify the person in the photograph even after the revelation that an apparent shot originated from the Grassy Knoll area. Instead, the image of “the black dog man” continued to remain a mystery.

The HSCA also neglected to thoroughly examine other photographic evidence that may have indicated conspiracy. Through its connections with reporters in Dallas, the committee discovered an 8mm home movie taken by an assassination witness named Charles L. Bronson. Bronson captured images of the presidential motorcade in Dealey Plaza with a home movie camera from an elevated position across the street from Abraham Zapruder. Bronson even captured a few brief seconds of the actual assassination including the fatal shot to the president’s head. Following the assassination, Bronson submitted his film to the FBI. However, the FBI found little evidentiary value in Bronson’s home movie. The film remained virtually unknown until a researcher happened across a recently declassified FBI memorandum that mentioned the film.⁶⁶

Surprisingly, Bronson’s footage of the actual assassination held little interest for committee investigators. Instead, the portions of Bronson’s film shot before the motorcade made its way into Dealey Plaza yielded the most significant results. Approximately six minutes prior to the motorcade’s arrival, Bronson filmed an ambulance near the Elm and Houston Street intersection picking up a man who had experienced an epileptic seizure. The background of this scene contained the Texas School Book Depository Building, including the alleged sniper’s nest window on the sixth floor.⁶⁷ Bronson’s film was similar to another home movie shot by bystander Robert

⁶⁶ Trask, *Pictures of the Pain*, 281-287.

⁶⁷ Charles L. Bronson, “Charles L. Bronson film,” *The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza* video, 2:08, November 22 & 23, 1963, <https://emuseum.jfk.org/objects/47373/charles-l-bronson->

Hughes which partially showed the windows as the president's motorcade made the turn onto Elm Street.⁶⁸ However, Bronson's film provided excellent clarity of the depository building prior to the shooting.⁶⁹ Early examination of the film by independent researchers appeared to indicate movement in several windows on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository Building.⁷⁰ However, due to time constraints the HSCA photo analysts only briefly studied the film. They ruled that the movement in the windows "was considered more likely to be a random photographic artifact than human movement."⁷¹

The Findings of the House Select Committee on Assassinations

In March 1979, the HSCA issued its final report on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Shockingly opposed to the ruling of the Warren Commission over fifteen years earlier, the congressional investigation found President Kennedy "was probably assassinated as the result of a conspiracy."⁷² The verdict seemed to verify consistent conspiracy claims that had circulated since the weekend of the assassination. Aside from its explosive conclusion, the report differed little from the initial findings of the Warren Commission investigation. The committee found Lee Harvey Oswald fired three shots at President Kennedy from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository Building. The Warren Commission's controversial single-bullet theory

film?ctx=fa4159d1-a354-4c3c-8cdd-3c7c04849351&idx=0. Bronson also returned to Dealey Plaza the day following the assassination and took more footage.

⁶⁸ Robert Hughes, "Robert Hughes film," *The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza* video, 1:33, November 22, 1963, <https://emuseum.jfk.org/objects/23202/robert-hughes-film>. Beginning in the mid-1960s, investigators noted apparent movement in the sniper's nest window on the sixth floor of the depository building in the Hughes film.

⁶⁹ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 49.

⁷⁰ Trask, *Pictures of the Pain*, 290.

⁷¹ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 49, 86. The photographic panel suggested that Bronson's film receive further analysis. A 1993 episode of PBS's *Frontline* examined the film and backed the committee's finding that the movement seen in the windows of the depository building was the result of film grain. See Trask, *Pictures of the Pain*, 301.

⁷² U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 95.

remained mostly intact in the congressional report. Aside from a slight timing change, the committee found substantial ballistic and medical evidence that one bullet passed through both President Kennedy and Governor Connally.⁷³

The committee made the controversial claim that another unknown gunman had fired at the president's motorcade from the stockade fence on the Grassy Knoll. This unknown assailant completely missed the car and its occupants.⁷⁴ The HSCA's assumed confirmation of an assassin on the Grassy Knoll arose exclusively from the discovery of the dictabelt recordings of the assassination; the committee's claim for conspiracy, then, relied on a single thread of scientific evidence that would prove controversial in coming years. Despite the alleged presence of a second gunman, the investigation could identify neither the assassin nor his connection to Oswald.⁷⁵

The medical panel also discredited the claims by conspiracy theorists that the medical evidence had been tampered with, including the photographs to hide the true nature of the president's wounds. Some conspiracists claimed the photographs had been edited to hide a large exit wound at the back of the president's head as witnessed by medical personnel at Parkland Hospital. The HSCA found no evidence of photographic trickery or deceit.⁷⁶ Dr. Cyril Wecht, the only dissenting member to the HSCA medical panel's ruling, noted several crucial medical materials, such as the president's brain and tissue slides, had been "mysteriously" absent from the archives for several years.⁷⁷

⁷³ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 41-47.

⁷⁴ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 74-80.

⁷⁵ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 128-129.

⁷⁶ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 43, 92.

⁷⁷ Cyril H. Wecht, "Pathologist's View of JFK Autopsy: An Unsolved Case," in *The Assassinations: Dallas and Beyond – A Guide to Cover-Ups and Investigations*, ed. Peter Dale Scott, Paul L. Hoch, and Russell Stetler (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 229.

Regardless, the committee mainly ignored the issue and asserted that the available materials proved the lone-gunman hypothesis correct.⁷⁸

Aside from Oswald and an alleged unknown gunman on the Grassy Knoll, the identities of those responsible remained equally vague. The committee cast suspicion on organized crime, particularly Carlos Marcello, a New Orleans Mafia kingpin, as being responsible for President Kennedy's death. However, the committee "was unable to establish direct evidence of Marcello's complicity." The committee claimed Oswald and Jack Ruby possessed unsubstantiated connections to the Marcello family.⁷⁹ With the HSCA's report focusing on vague accusations of Mafia involvement, the committee cleared the usual list of suspects that had dominated the popular conspiracy narrative. The committee found no evidence indicating Soviet or Cuban involvement. The report also vindicated the CIA, FBI, and CIA of involvement in President Kennedy's assassination.⁸⁰

The conspiracist community and public reaction to the 1979 report of the HSCA's investigation were lukewarm at best. The results received little publicity especially in comparison to the Warren Commission's Report in 1964. The language the committee used in its report lacked the closure and detail the public had demanded in connection with the Kennedy assassination. The HSCA's conspiracy ruling contained an air of vagueness and ambivalence. While definitive scientific evidence supported Oswald's guilt, the findings of a conspiracy in the assassination appeared questionable and were solely based on controversial acoustics evidence. In many respects, the report resembled

⁷⁸ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 42-43.

⁷⁹ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 169. The committee found that Charles Murret, Oswald's uncle, had connections to underground gambling in New Orleans. The committee was unable to confirm if Murret personally knew Marcello. No evidence was found suggesting that Oswald and Ruby knew each other.

⁸⁰ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 1, 181.

a hollow and bureaucratic attempt to appease both supporters of the lone-gunman narrative and those who asserted that a conspiracy claimed the life of the young president.⁸¹

Aside from the vague wording of the HSCA's verdict of conspiracy, the lack of excitement surrounding the release of the report had other foundations. Although the report acknowledged conspiracy, many conspiracists rejected the committee's claims believing the investigation did not go far enough or expose the real culprits behind President Kennedy's murder.⁸² By the time of the committee's verdict, the conspiracy mania of the mid-1970s had transformed into common acceptance. Conspiracy theories became a given in American popular thought. The committee's findings, which should have been an explosive exposé and confirmation of conspiracy, became another event in a long list of conspiratorial theorizing that included topics such as MK-Ultra and UFOs.⁸³

The HSCA, which both the conspiracists and the general public had looked to in order to right the wrongs of the Warren Commission, failed to provide a substantial report that resolved questions around the Kennedy Assassination. In fact, the committee gave conspiracists yet another government investigation to complain about, despite its findings of a probable conspiracy. The committee provided little closure to the subject and deferred further criminal investigation to the Justice Department.⁸⁴ A 1982 study performed by an independent acoustics firm found that the segment of the dictabelt recording containing the reported gunshot impulses originated nearly one minute after the

⁸¹ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 71-72, 92. Adding further to the unclear and confusing verdict of the HSCA investigation, Knight notes that the official report contains appendices that offer dissenting opinions on the evidence the committee examined.

⁸² Michael L. Kurtz, *Crime of the Century: The Kennedy Assassination from a Historian's Perspective*, 3rd ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013), 186-187, 238.

⁸³ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 255-256.

⁸⁴ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 7.

shooting.⁸⁵ The HSCA claim of conspiracy, which hinged on the acoustics evidence, collapsed.⁸⁶

Although the release of the HSCA's investigation and report on the assassination proved insufficient in answering the questions around the president's murder, infighting had already taken over the conspiracy community and divided any further sense of cohesion amongst the theorists. The conspiracists found themselves busily promoting and protecting their own theories. Other conspiracy theorists had drawn their own conclusions and would not concede any evidence proved otherwise. By the time the HSCA wrapped up its investigation, the conspiracy community had already fractured significantly.⁸⁷

The Identity of the Assassin

On November 24, 1963, when Jack Ruby sprang forward from a crowd of reporters gathered in the basement of Dallas Police Headquarters and fired a fatal bullet into Oswald's abdomen, he robbed history of the answer to a nagging question both single-assassin supporters and conspiracy theorists would ask over subsequent decades: who was Lee Harvey Oswald? Since the weekend of the assassination, both federal investigations and amateur researchers attempted to answer that question with varying results. The official, lone-gunman supporters viewed Oswald as an unstable political radical who shot Kennedy to achieve his own degree of remembrance; however, conspiracy theorists transformed Oswald's identity into something more complex, mysterious, and sinister.⁸⁸ As conspiracists attempted to make sense out of Oswald's life

⁸⁵ Committee on Ballistics Acoustics, National Research Council, "Reexamination of Acoustic Evidence in the Kennedy Assassination," *Science* 218, no. 4568 (October 8, 1982), 133.

⁸⁶ "New Study on Slaying of Kennedy Doubts 2d Gunman Was Involved," *The New York Times*, May 15, 1982, 35; Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 72.

⁸⁷ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 92.

⁸⁸ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 54-58.

and actions, his role in the assassination became as malleable as the assassination narrative itself. By the late-1970s, the myths surrounding Oswald reached fantastic heights and divided many in the assassination research community.

Intense speculation about Oswald's identity dated back to the first wave of Warren Commission criticism. In 1966, Richard H. Popkin, chairman of the Philosophy Department of the University of California at San Diego, published a book entitled *The Second Oswald* which outlined a striking theory about Oswald's participation in the president's murder. According to Popkin, the real conspirators framed Oswald for the crime utilizing a double.⁸⁹ According to Popkin in *The Second Oswald*, eyewitnesses reportedly saw Oswald impersonators in Dallas prior to the president's assassination. These Oswald doppelgangers implicated the real Oswald by making bizarre and outright Marxist comments so witnesses would remember the events.⁹⁰ This theory suggested a powerful and unseen group of individuals framed Oswald for the president's assassination without his knowledge.⁹¹ Although never proven with sufficient evidence other than eyewitness reports, the idea of several Oswald impersonators attempting to implicate the authentic Oswald became an integral part of Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories.⁹² It also demonstrated the degree of doubt that had become a

⁸⁹ Richard H. Popkin, *The Second Oswald* (New York: Avon Books, 1966), 95.

⁹⁰ Popkin, *The Second Oswald*, 74-89. Popkin remarks significantly on three noteworthy "second Oswald" appearances. The first involved Oswald being seen in the company of two Cuban men by Sylvia Odio who identified Oswald as "Leon Oswald." A second dramatic encounter occurred when Oswald allegedly test drove an automobile and made comments about the vehicle's price, hinting at his time as a defector in Russia. Another incident involved an Oswald lookalike at a shooting range. Author Gerald Posner notes misidentifications are common after events of the magnitude of the president's assassination (see Posner, *Case Closed*, 174.).

⁹¹ Popkin, *The Second Oswald*, 115-116. Popkin's theory of responsible parties for the assassination would later expand to alarmingly paranoid heights. By the middle 1970s, he claimed that CIA utilized "zombie assassins" to kill President Kennedy (see Dick Russell, "Professor Popkin & the Robot Assassin: 'Dear Mr. President: I Know Who Killed JFK....'", *Village Voice*, September 1, 1975, 12-14.).

⁹² Anson, "*They've Murdered the President!*", 191-217.

foundation for conspiracy thinking. Not only did conspiracy theorists advocate Oswald's innocence, they now attempted to distance Oswald from other elements of the crime.

Before the HSCA investigation, most conspiracy theorists believed Oswald had some connection to the intelligence communities within the United States. In the conspiracy research community, Oswald morphed into an international spy rather than the disaffected loser the Warren Commission claimed. They cited Oswald's apparent training while in the United States Marine Corps, specifically his study of Russian and his position at a top-secret radar facility in Japan, as evidence that Oswald was more than he seemed on the surface. To the conspiracists, Oswald's apparent Marxist leanings had been part of a front and his defection to Russia had been arranged purposely by intelligence. Despite Oswald's alleged clandestine service to his country, the powerful and unknown conspiracy targeted Oswald as its patsy. He became an individual caught in a reprehensible web of deceit. In this narrative, the conspiracy theorists transformed Oswald from a villain into a form of anti-hero.⁹³ By the mid-1970s, though, the portrait of the would-be assassin altered again, and this transformation severely divided the research community.

While some conspiracy researchers claimed evidence in the Kennedy assassination had been falsified or altered in some degree, Michael H.B. Eddowes, a British entrepreneur and author, took these claims to new heights. Eddowes himself appeared as a strange character in the conspiracy camp. An elderly gentleman, Eddowes

⁹³ For a few notable examples focusing on Oswald as intelligence agent see: Anson, "They've Killed the President!", 154-160; Bob Katz, "Who was Lee Harvey Oswald?," in *Government by Gunplay: Assassination Theories from Dallas to Today*, ed. Sid Blumenthal and Harvey Yazijian (New York: Signet, 1976), 10-26; Harold Weisberg, *Whitewash: The Report on the Warren Report* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 1965), 119-124.

had made a fortune in the restaurant business. He wore crisp three-piece suits, was chauffeured around in expensive Rolls-Royces, and spoke in a stately British accent. Eddowes' regality made him appear as an outsider in the conspiracy research community. However, his influence grew exponentially within the research community following the publication of a high-profile theory he devised and championed in the latter half of the 1970s.⁹⁴

In 1975, Eddowes self-published a book entitled *Khrushchev Killed Kennedy*. Although the idea of Russian involvement in the president's assassination was not a new concept, Eddowes' book expanded significantly on earlier conjecture of Oswald's role in the plot to kill President Kennedy. Unlike earlier conspiracy theorists who claimed Oswald had been shadowed and impersonated by doubles, Eddowes cited evidence that the Oswald taken into police custody on the afternoon of November 22, 1963, was not the Oswald who defected to the Soviet Union in the early 1960s. To Eddowes, an imposter replaced the real Oswald while in Russia and returned to the United States on a secret KGB mission to assassinate the president.⁹⁵

Eddowes based his radical theory on a comparison of Oswald's records and photographs. Eddowes believed he had found significant discrepancies between Oswald's physical appearance between his time in the United States Marine Corps and his arrest in Dallas. He argued Oswald's height had changed from his Marine Corps records. While in the Marine Corps, Oswald's records listed his height at approximately five feet, eleven inches tall. However, while in Dallas police custody, records listed the height of the

⁹⁴ Ron Rosenbaum, "Still on the Case," *Texas Monthly*, November 1983, <https://texasmonthly.com/politics/still-on-the-case>.

⁹⁵ Michael H.B. Eddowes, *Khrushchev Killed Kennedy* (Dallas: self-published, 1975), 1.

assassin as five foot, nine inches tall. Eddowes pointed out Oswald's autopsy reports noted none of the scars that Oswald had acquired during his short lifetime. He believed the photographs of Oswald taken in Dallas showed significant differences in facial structure from early photographs of Oswald. He also wrote that the original Oswald possessed connections with a variety of organizations, including both the CIA and organized crime. Eddowes believed a mysterious coded notebook contained this evidence.⁹⁶ *Khrushchev Killed Kennedy* added a new element to the alleged defamation of Oswald: not only had Oswald been a patsy for the crime of murdering the president, his identity had also been stolen. To Eddowes, the conclusion became inescapable. Oswald was not Oswald at all.

However, Eddowes based his conclusions on dubious and easily refutable evidence. The discrepancies between height, from Oswald's Marine Corp records and his arrest, may have resulted from something as simple as clerical error. Eddowes' photographic proof of different facial characteristics neglected to mention that the photographs of Oswald were taken nearly four years apart. Oswald, twenty-four at the time of his death, may have simply gained or lost weight during that period. The use of different cameras, lenses, and lighting could also account for anomalies between the photographs.⁹⁷ The HSCA also addressed the "two Oswalds" theory and found handwriting samples of Oswald's over a seven-year period proved to be from the same

⁹⁶ Eddowes, *Khrushchev Killed Kennedy*, 13-14, 39-40, 102, 243-248.

⁹⁷ Vincent Bugliosi, *Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 1040-1041.

individual.⁹⁸ The committee also found no evidence supporting Eddowes' conclusion that Oswald was a KGB assassin or of Soviet involvement in the president's assassination.⁹⁹

Despite its seemingly unbelievable premise, in this era of suspicion and paranoia the false-Oswald theory took off. News media covered the story extensively and granted Eddowes interviews. Much like the "Umbrella Man" debacle of the HSCA, the story of a Soviet assassin posing as Oswald transformed the assassination into a bizarre spy-thriller. The publication of Eddowes' theory coincided with renewed tensions between the Soviet Union concerning nuclear weapons and increased American budgetary spending on defense.¹⁰⁰ Instead of offering hard evidence, the theory of Oswald as a Soviet imposter remained pure speculation derived from postwar fears of communist infiltration in areas of American life and society. Eddowes' theory reinforced a belief that communist forces had infiltrated the country from within.

Other conspiracy theorists latched onto Eddowes work and attempted to explore the alleged Soviet angle with career damaging consequences. Mary Farrell, a Dallas researcher who possessed one of the most significant collections of assassination-related documents, backed Eddowes. Farrell staked her reputation on Eddowes' claims and reportedly donated a substantial amount of money to Eddowes to aid his research.¹⁰¹ Edward J. Epstein, the author of 1966's *Inquest*, also jumped into the fray. Leaving behind his early pointed critique of the Warren Commission, Epstein focused solely on Oswald's background. Epstein believed Oswald had KGB connections, claims that

⁹⁸ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 92-93.

⁹⁹ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report*, 99-103.

¹⁰⁰ James T. Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 102-104.

¹⁰¹ Rosenbaum, "Still on the Case," <https://www.texasmonthly.com/politics/still-on-the-case>.

became the basis for his 1978 book *Legend*. Epstein now claimed that Oswald had ties to the Soviet Union, specifically the KGB.¹⁰² He even suggested Oswald may have relayed information to the Soviets concerning the United States' U2 spy plane program.¹⁰³ At best, Epstein's claims represented a confusing rabbit hole of unsubstantiated theories that arose from statements given by an unreliable KGB informant while under interrogation and imprisonment.¹⁰⁴ The Eddowes theory of an imposter Oswald and the expansion of Oswald's supposed Soviet connections during his time as a defector divided the research community. Some conspiracists even felt Eddowes was himself a diversion meant to move focus from the popular 1970s theory that elements of the federal government had orchestrated President Kennedy's assassination.¹⁰⁵

By 1980, the debate over the real identity of Oswald had reached a fever pitch. Pundits suggested forensic science could settle the debate once and for all.¹⁰⁶ With those hopes in mind, Oswald's widow allowed the exhumation of Oswald's body. Following several months of speculation, medical study of dental records confirmed the body as Lee Harvey Oswald.¹⁰⁷ Despite scientific proof, conspiracy theorists still cast doubts on the results. Some conspiracy theorists devised an elaborate and macabre theory to explain the medical findings. One theory alleged conspirators switched both the skulls of Oswald and

¹⁰² Edward J. Epstein, *Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1978), xi-xiii, 259-260.

¹⁰³ Epstein, *Legend*, 122.

¹⁰⁴ Epstein, *Legend*, 44-45; Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 130-131.

¹⁰⁵ Rosenbaum, "Still on the Case," <https://www.texasmonthly.com/politics/still-on-the-case>.

¹⁰⁶ Molly Ivins, "Forensic Science Expands Its Role," *The New York Times*, October 23, 1979, C1, C3; "Officials Seek to Examine Body in Oswald's Grave," *The New York Times*, October 19, 1979, A14.

¹⁰⁷ "Oswald's Body Is Exhumed; An Autopsy Affirms Identity," *The New York Times*, October 5, 1981, 1, A16.

his imposter.¹⁰⁸ To the conspiracists unable to accept the evidence, the conspirators continued to hide the truth and even resorted to bizarre skullduggery.

The controversy over Oswald's identity and exhumation signaled an alarming and growing development in conspiracy thinking. The many theories surrounding the president's death, coupled with the sheer amount of evidence in the case, created a confusing multitude of independent and contradictory scenarios. Fueled by the nervous tensions of the 1970s, conspiracy theorists questioned the integrity of the evidence itself. By 1980, claims of evidence tampering ventured into new territory. Everything in the assassination canon, from the contents of the Zapruder film to the physical condition of the president's body at the official autopsy, became suspect to conspiratorial manipulation.

An Empty Coffin

In 1980, David Lifton published *Best Evidence: Disguise and Deception in the Assassination of John F. Kennedy* and ushered in a new paradigm for the assassination conspiracy narrative. Lifton, a Cornell University graduate, published several articles on the assassination but spent over fifteen years researching his first book. The publication of *Best Evidence* established Lifton as a prominent conspiracist and generated a shockwave through the assassination community that continued to be felt into the subsequent decades. The controversial nature of Lifton's work led publishers to consult outside sources to fact-check the explosive thesis contained in *Best Evidence*.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Posner, *Case Closed*, 27-28; Dolly Stolze, "Exhuming Lee Harvey Oswald," *Forensic Magazine*, March 4, 2016, <https://www.forensicmag.com/article/2016/03/exhuming-lee-harvey-oswald>.

¹⁰⁹ Edwin McDowell, "New Books on John Kennedy Death Issued Quietly," *The New York Times*, January 12, 1981, C17.

Best Evidence offered a solution to an earlier problem that had plagued assassination researchers concerning the observations of the emergency personnel who attempted to save President Kennedy's life at Parkland hospital. Several Parkland doctors and nurses reported the president had a large exit wound at the back of his skull and the wound in the location of the president's throat was that of entry; however, the witnesses to the president's autopsy at Bethesda Naval Hospital reported a larger wound to the president's skull and an exit wound at the president's throat. In response to this conundrum, Lifton devised a radical theory to account for the apparent discrepancies of the wounds between the two locations. In *Best Evidence*, Lifton postulated that both parties were correct in their observations of the body. Lifton believed President Kennedy's body had been altered at some point prior to arrival at Bethesda. Sometime before the autopsy, doctors performed clandestine surgery on the president's body in order to hide the true nature of the wounds. Aside from obliterating evidence of multiple assassins, the macabre procedures rendered any evaluation of the president's medical evidence ambiguous.¹¹⁰

Lifton's theory proved shocking, grisly, and gruesome. However, Lifton presented an obsessively detailed account for the premise of body alteration. He discovered that some of the eyewitnesses claimed the president's casket arrived at an earlier time than officially noted. They also claimed the body arrived in a different casket than had been furnished in Dallas. Lifton believed the president's body had been secreted to Walter Reed Medical Center for covert post-mortem surgery before the official autopsy. He further developed his claims by citing a report issued by two FBI agents

¹¹⁰ David S. Lifton, *Best Evidence: Disguise and Deception in the Assassination of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers Inc., 1980), 321-328, 335-337.

present at the time of post-mortem examination. An ambiguous line in the report mentioned surgical procedures had been performed on the president's head prior to the official autopsy. Lifton even believed the official autopsy photographs showed President Kennedy's brain was missing. *Best Evidence* presented the Kennedy autopsy as a complex shell game of caskets and medical subterfuge. The best evidence in the Kennedy assassination, which Lifton asserted was the president's body, had been corrupted by the conspirators.¹¹¹

When released, *Best Evidence* generated a great deal of controversy. The book became an immediate best-seller and sold over one hundred thousand copies in its first printing.¹¹² Lifton even offered a collector's set version of *Best Evidence* that included a videotape of interviews and his autograph.¹¹³ Both critics and assassination researchers found Lifton's central thesis of body alteration outrageous and unbelievable.¹¹⁴ Lifton's theory also broke with conspiracy logic by portraying the conspirators as precise and effective in the execution of their plot.¹¹⁵ *Best Evidence* immediately affected the conspiracy research community. The book stood opposite of the more politically charged theories of the late 1970s. In many respects, it represented a back-to-basics approach by bringing focus back to the medical evidence in the assassination.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Lifton, *Best Evidence*, 295-297, 585-587, 598-600, 661-663, 685-690, 692.

¹¹² Harrison E. Salisbury, "JFK and Further Sinister Forces," *The New York Times*, February 22, 1981, 11.

¹¹³ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 132.

¹¹⁴ Salisbury, "JFK and Further Sinister Forces," 11; Posner, *Case Closed*, 294-297. Posner quotes conspiracy theorist and pathologist Dr. Cyril Wecht as saying, "I could assemble a whole team of the best surgeons in the country and still not be able to accomplish in a day what Lifton says was done in a few hours."

¹¹⁵ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 95. Lifton's theory hinges on all conspiracy action having been planned well in advance without any type of deviation.

¹¹⁶ For more on the medical evidence, see Robert Groden and Harrison Edward Livingstone, *High Treason: The Assassination of President Kennedy and the New Evidence of Conspiracy* (New York: Berkley Books, 1989).

The most significant effect of *Best Evidence* involved its assessment of the validity of the evidence. Lifton's work represented an entire abandonment of the official narrative for the Kennedy assassination. It called into question the authenticity of the evidence that had been presented to the general public for almost two decades. At this point, evidence in the assassination became immediately suspect of having been tampered with or, at worst, completely fabricated. Lifton even suggested that the Zapruder film, which conspiracists believed showed tell-all signs of conspiracy, had been altered by covert photo technicians to match the wounds described in the president's post-mortem examination.¹¹⁷ This doubt in the evidence only continued to escalate. *Best Evidence* effectively stripped away remaining perceptions of evidence in the Kennedy assassination as objective. Theories became nebulous or malleable, and the hard evidence was rendered suspect and open to interpretation. Facts did not matter, only perception fueled by a culture questioning everything.

The Divided Eighties

Despite divisions in the conspiracy community, one significant theme developed going into the 1980s. The pursuit of justice that conspiracy theorists worked toward in the 1960s disappeared following their frustration regarding the HSCA's failure to present an adequate and fulfilling investigation. Any sense of activism and relevance seemed to fade as the events of November 22, 1963 continued to move further into history. Attempts to find objective truth seemingly evaporated, replaced by subjective feeling and interpretation. By this point, researchers had exhausted all resources. Only theories

¹¹⁷ Lifton, *Best Evidence*, 555-557. The topic of Zapruder film alteration would only expand in future years. For arguments against alteration, see Josiah Thompson, "Bedrock Evidence in the Kennedy Assassination," *Mary Farrell Foundation*, https://www.maryferrell.org/pages/Essay_-_Bedrock_Evidence_in_the_Kennedy_Assassination.html, accessed on October 25, 2019.

remained. New evidence rarely emerged; instead, unsubstantiated and often wild theories became the driving narrative, leading investigators into a bottomless rabbit hole of unreality. The decade of the 1980s signaled the complete transformation of the Kennedy assassination into myth.

Issues such as the HSCA and the debacle over Oswald's body resulted in further fracturing of the Kennedy assassination research community. Not only did contributors disagree in terms of how the assassination happened or which parties were responsible, the conspiracy theorists split into varying camps of belief. They pursued their aims with almost religious fanaticism and demanded the utmost devotion from supporters. The earlier paranoia that enveloped the 1970s also contributed to this continued split between ideologies and members of the research community. Some conspiracists suspected government agents or others connected to a larger conspiracy had infiltrated their ranks. This gave researchers fair reason to deny the works of other conspiracy theorists. Whatever became detrimental to the conspiracy cause could simply be dubbed disinformation meant to stir the authentic researchers further away from the truth.

The Kennedy assassination conspiracy research community also split because of fierce competition among themselves. By this point, the community had not only split ideologically but lacked a strong cohesive center. Some earlier researchers had abandoned the case altogether due to intense infighting and overexposure.¹¹⁸ By the time the HSCA had wrapped up their investigation, chaos reigned amongst conspiracists.

¹¹⁸ Rosenbaum, "Still on the Case," <https://texasmonthly.com/politics/still-on-the-case>. Rosenbaum's article featured an interview with Josiah Thompson, author of 1967's *Six Seconds in Dallas*. By the time of the interview, Thompson had shifted his attentions away from the assassination and worked as a private investigator. On the state of assassination research in the 1970s and early 1980s, Thompson told Rosenbaum, "Uncertainty has replaced clarity."

Unlike the earlier set of critics who banded together under the banner of attacking the Warren Report, the new set of critics, fueled by the revelations of investigative journalism and congressional probes of the 1970s, splintered.

Instead of generating a broad picture of the assassination, they focused on minute points or niches within the assassination narrative. The movement toward compartmentalization originated in the 1960s. R.B. Cutler, author of *The Umbrella Man*, wrote about an encounter he had with Warren Commission critic Penn Jones, Jr. in the late 1960s. Jones suggested to Cutler that assassination researchers should pursue a specific avenue of study within the assassination and that the sum of these parts would blow the cover off the conspiracy. Cutler adopted Jones's suggestion and developed his infamous theory that the "Umbrella Man" was one of the conspirators.¹¹⁹ Financial incentive also factored into research with conspiracy theorists making thousands of dollars from their efforts.¹²⁰ Instead of specific areas of study coming together in a clear picture of absolute truth, the assassination narrative became an asymmetrical and enormous mosaic of both objective and subjective interpretations.

An overall belief in conspiracies remained present in the mind of the American public as the 1980s began. Americans still subjected to varying degrees of political and social unrest conjured up uncomfortable memories of the 1960s and 1970s. Crises such as the Iranian hostage situation, rampant inflation, and energy shortages kept Americans on edge. The rise of conservatism, including the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and the formation of the Moral Majority, focused on fears of "big government" and unethical

¹¹⁹ Cutler, *The Umbrella Man*, 1.

¹²⁰ McDowell, "New Book on John Kennedy Death Quietly Issued," C17. Lifton received a ten-thousand-dollar advance for his work on *Best Evidence*.

evils that lurked under the surface of American life.¹²¹ Although belief in Kennedy assassination theories wavered, people still heavily favored conspiracy as the explanation.¹²²

The end of the 1970s also saw the genesis of a new mindset toward the evidence in the assassination. While in the 1960s, the early Warren Commission critics expressed doubts concerning the way the evidence had been utilized by government investigators, the new assassination buffs came to a different, more extreme, conclusion. Following the political and social events that had seriously damaged the foundation of authority in the country, the conspiracists started to doubt the authenticity of the evidence in the Kennedy assassination at all. Some conspiracists suggested the evidence itself had been corrupted or edited in some fashion to hide the truth. This doubt in the evidence led to future developments by conspiracists in the assassination narrative.¹²³

By the 1980s, the assassination took its place as modern folklore. The interpretation of the assassination drifted from politically motivated murder to an event with larger cultural and moral implications. By this point, the list of conspirators and organizations accused of being involved in the president's murder had grown to immense proportions. The theories contained in assassination literature included a confusing and ever-growing list of subjects and tangents. However, the specter of a shadowy elite government conspiracy remained. This nefarious group of unknowns represented a dark force that had robbed the nation of its true history. Following the activism of the 1960s

¹²¹ Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 126-133.

¹²² Sheldon Appleton, "Trends: Assassinations," in *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 514, accessed on September 5, 2019, <https://libcatalog.atu.edu:443/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cms&AN=4224008&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹²³ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 129-130.

and the mass paranoia of the 1970s, the assassination narrative emerged into the new decade as a morality tale—a modern parable—of good versus evil.

IV. Past is Prologue (1983-1993)

S.M. Holland, a weathered and aged railroad signal operator from Dallas, Texas, pointed toward a tree-lined picket fence at the top of the Grassy Knoll in Dealey Plaza. In 1967, Holland had spoken with New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison and another investigator from the top of the Triple Underpass. Approximately four years previous, Holland witnessed the shooting death of President Kennedy from this location. Holland told the investigators, “I made it very clear to the Warren people [that] one of the shots came from behind that picket fence. I heard the report and saw the smoke come out about 6 to 8 feet above the ground, right out from under those trees. There is no doubt whatsoever in my mind.” A flashback to the events of November 22, 1963 indeed showed an assassin firing at the presidential motorcade behind the cover of the wooden fence. As the assassin melted away into the chaos of Dealey Plaza, a thick plume of gun smoke hung over the area.¹

Or, at least, that is how film audiences saw it in a 1991 big-budgeted, star-studded film entitled *JFK*. By the early 1990s, the seeds planted by conspiracy theorists of the previous decades blossomed into a persistent state of apprehensive and obsessive public neurosis. Most significantly, popular culture of the 1980s and early 1990s transformed the Kennedy assassination narrative into a hazy American mythology of fact and fiction. All semblance of objective truth became interlocked with subjective contextual elements.

¹ Oliver Stone and Zachary Skylar, *JFK: The Book of the Film* (New York: Applause Books, 1992), 121. While filming the reenactment of the president’s shooting for *JFK*, Stone’s production crew was initially unable to recreate the amount of smoke allegedly seen by assassination eyewitnesses. None of the guns used for filming generated enough smoke to show up on film. To solve this problem, Stone had a production assistant use a bellows and puff large amounts of smoke into the air while hiding behind the Grassy Knoll fence.

This mixture said more about the current state of American culture than about the assassination itself.

A Personal and Political Remembrance

The Kennedy assassination achieved widespread, almost fanatical, resurgence in popular discussion and culture during the latter half of the 1980s. Reminders of the heightened tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1980s reignited fears of nuclear annihilation.² Political scandals such as Iran-Contra reminded Americans of the previous transgressions committed by the federal government and caused a further loss of trust.³ Painful memories of the Vietnam War still haunted Americans. Although over a decade had passed since the Watergate scandal, Americans continued to doubt the veracity of the United States government. Many Americans now remembered the Kennedy assassination as the moment they lost faith in the government.⁴

Many liberal-minded Americans expressed disappointment in the trajectory of the country during the Reagan administration. Conservative political, economic, and cultural policies garnered significant popularity and outraged liberals. Many members of the baby boomer generation, forged into adulthood in the crucible of the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, still harbored leftist-leaning ideologies that had defined the cultural and political movements of the previous decades, and perceived few changes for the better during the Reagan administration.⁵

² Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 219-221.

³ Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 256.

⁴ Peter Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 98.

⁵ James T. Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush V. Gore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 158-159, 183-186, 191.

Despite differences in political ideologies, both conservative and liberal Americans shared lasting feelings of paranoia and unrest throughout their everyday lives. Distrust and suspicion continued to lurk under the surface of American thought. Fears of an oppressive, evil empire lingered. Bolstered by President Reagan's own words, the Cold War against the Soviet Union continued uninterrupted without an end in sight.⁶ The rampant conspiracy mania of the 1970s subtly reemerged in theories about alleged political and moral decay of society during the 1980s and 1990s. Philip Jenkins, a professor of history and religious studies at Pennsylvania State University, argues the intense paranoia of the 1970s "left lingering echoes in persistent theories about foreign plots and terror networks, child abuse rings and satanic networks."⁷

As the years since the president's assassination passed, many Americans looked back on both President Kennedy's administration and his tragic death with wistful nostalgia. Although Jim Garrison and other conspiracy theorists had intertwined feelings of a lost American idealism in their assassination theories during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the 1980s saw this point of view come to complete fruition. As the assassination faded further into history, the Kennedy era became symbolic of an alternate and righteous form of United States History. Some believed that if President Kennedy had lived, trying events such as the Vietnam War and the explosive social upheaval of the 1960s would never have happened. The assassination became a focal point for the United States' descent into unrest and distrust. The events prior to 12:30 PM CST on November 22, 1963 represented the optimistic future that Americans were supposed to have inherited.

⁶ Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 194. During a speech in March 1983, Reagan labelled the Soviet Union an "evil empire."

⁷ Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 22-23.

According to conspiracy theorists, the events after the president's death resulted from a plot to steer the country in a volatile direction. To many, evil forces conspired and robbed the nation of its rightful history and prosperous trajectory. These feelings allowed conspiracy theories to flourish well into the 1990s.⁸

By the mid-1980s and early 1990s, Americans viewed the assassination differently from previous decades. The assassination researchers of the 1960s viewed their work as a call for justice. By the 1970s, many perceived the assassination as clear evidence that the federal government exercised powers beyond the control of its people, transforming President Kennedy's murder into an event of mythic status. The American public's feelings of nostalgia and desire for an alternate version of the truth transformed the meaning of the assassination yet again. The events and mysteries surrounding the president's death mutated into a modern, dialectical metaphor of good versus evil in post-Watergate America.

By the twentieth anniversary of the assassination in Dallas, deep wounds remained in American public consciousness concerning President Kennedy's administration and his tragic death. Viewpoints of President Kennedy's legacy shifted little from the immediate aftermath of the president's murder. Intense feelings of nostalgia and sadness still defined how Americans felt about the Kennedy legacy. A November 1983 Harris Poll demonstrated the number of individuals who missed President Kennedy had only slightly decreased since an earlier poll conducted in 1964. In fact, the amount of people who answered "time heals all wounds" had decreased. The poll also showed seventy-seven percent of Americans still fondly remembered Kennedy's

⁸ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 149; Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 98.

presidency and considered him one of the best presidents the country had seen. The poll noted that “No other recent president comes up with a retrospective [sic] rating approximating that of Kennedy's.”⁹

The November 1983 Harris poll also indicated surprising results regarding the actions for which Kennedy was remembered. In the twenty years since the president's death, the public remembered President Kennedy's actions differently than their 1964 counterparts. The 1964 Harris poll numbers indicated many remembered President Kennedy primarily for his actions during the Cuban Missile Crisis, being the first Catholic president, and his 1961 inaugural address. However, those polled in 1983 remembered Kennedy's presidency for other reasons. While the Cuban Missile Crisis remained at the top of the list, the participants in the 1983 poll indicated they remembered President Kennedy for the 1961 Bay of Pigs operation and the president's stance on civil rights. In fact, remembrance of Kennedy's connection to the Bay of Pigs rose from eighteen percent in 1964 to twenty-nine percent in 1983.¹⁰

The 1983 Harris poll demonstrated that the president's public memory was linked with the paranoia and chaos of the late-1960s and 1970s. As indicated by the November 1983 poll, political events which shaped President Kennedy's legacy made up integral parts of assassination conspiracy theories. Starting in the late 1960s, conspiracy theorists tied President Kennedy's murder to both the disastrous CIA-led Bay of Pigs as well as

⁹ Louis Harris, “Strong Emotions, Feelings Still Linger for JFK,” *The Harris Survey*, November 21, 1983, 1. The poll indicated Kennedy was missed predominately by liberal Democrats. However, the poll yielded other interesting results. It indicated both people living in large cities and small communities had similar polling numbers. Over fifty percent of African Americans polled said they missed the president more than right after his assassination. The poll also found that more women missed President Kennedy than men.

¹⁰ Harris, “Strong, Emotional Feelings Still Linger for JFK,” 2. The list of Kennedy-related events read to the participants of the 1983 Harris poll did not include any answers directly related to the president's assassination.

the president's progressive liberal stances. Many felt that President Kennedy had upset the balance of a ruling and hidden elite class.¹¹ In the years and decades following President Kennedy's murder, political subterfuge dominated and defined public perceptions of the assassination's motive.

The Kennedy Assassination Recalibrated

Although support of incredible theories, such as David Lifton's body alteration hypothesis, continued into the mid-1980s, many Kennedy assassination conspiracy theorists attempted to make the conspiracy narrative more digestible to wider audiences. Instead of espousing sometimes shoddy and extraordinary theories that tested credulity, the conspiracy theorists of the mid-to-late 1980s focused their efforts on creating an overall assassination narrative that attempted to combine many of the familiar points of conspiracy into one conglomerated enemy. These researchers focused on a basis of evidence available since the mid-1960s. Popular points of conspiracy discussion such as the single-bullet theory, the Zapruder film, and the eye/ear witness testimony of spectators in Dealey Plaza formed the basis of this new approach. The conspiracy theorists returned to the fundamental evidentiary base that helped sway public opinion shortly after the president's murder.

Originally published in 1980, the same year as Lifton's *Best Evidence*, Anthony Summers's *Conspiracy* (later retitled *Not in Your Lifetime: The Defining Book on the J.F.K. Assassination*) represented a major reappraisal of the Kennedy Assassination from a conspiracy viewpoint. Summers' book also contained the then-recent findings of the HSCA and factored them into its pages. Following the lead of the HSCA, Summers

¹¹ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 89-90.

believed members of organized crime were involved in killing the president.¹² In Summers' narrative of the assassination, rogue CIA and American intelligence agents remained the central conspirators.¹³ Summers constructed a scenario in which CIA assets and professional Mafia assassins conspired and executed President Kennedy.¹⁴ He attempted to tie both the findings of the HSCA with the earlier conjecture of conspiracy theorists concerning government involvement in the assassination.

Summers' book also brought many of the classic conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination back into the forefront. He cited the witness testimony and Zapruder film as proof of a knoll assassin.¹⁵ He also attacked the apparent improbability of the single-bullet theory.¹⁶ *Conspiracy* returned conspiracy theories back to their core elements. Summers attempted to bring about an evidentiary middle ground between the established cornerstones of the assassination as well as some of the wilder conspiracy theories of the community.

Following in a similar vein as *Conspiracy*, Michael L. Kurtz published *Crime of the Century: The Kennedy Assassination from a Historian's Perspective*. As a professor of history at Southeastern Louisiana University, Kurtz represented a rarity in the

¹² Anthony Summers, *Not in Your Lifetime: The Defining Book on the J.F.K. Assassination* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2013), 136.

¹³ Summers, *Not in Your Lifetime*, 120.

¹⁴ Summers, *Not in Your Lifetime*, 423-432. Summers cites the claims of undercover informants in contact with Mafia kingpin Carlos Marcello. One of the informants even quotes Marcello as saying, "Yeah, I had the son of a bitch killed. I'm glad I did. I'm sorry I couldn't have done it myself." Gerald Posner disputes claims of Marcello's involvement in President Kennedy's murder, citing nearly thirty years of FBI surveillance that turned up little evidence, see Gerald Posner, *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 461-462.

¹⁵ Summers, *Not in Your Lifetime*, 35, 43-44. Summers makes the grandiose claim that immediate release of the Zapruder film would have convinced the public "...that their president had been shot from the front..."

¹⁶ Summers, *Not in Your Lifetime*, 46-51. The author brings up the possibility that the bullet recovered from Parkland Hospital may have been planted by conspirators to implicate Oswald's rifle as the murder weapon.

assassination research field in that he had an academic background. Not only did Kurtz's profession differentiate him from most of his peers, he also embraced the idea of conspiracy in the Kennedy assassination.¹⁷ However, Kurtz criticized theories central to the conspiracy canon since the mid-1960s such as elements of the single-bullet theory and the president's throat wound.¹⁸ Much like Summers, Kurtz focused on the essential evidence of the assassination. He found it more satisfactory to establish the existence of a conspiracy before proceeding into any further accusations.¹⁹ The book also criticized the findings of the HSCA despite its ruling that others had been involved in the Kennedy murder.²⁰ *Crime of the Century* represented a major reappraisal of the Kennedy assassination narrative. Kurtz attempted to level a field marred by academic neglect and unsubstantiated conspiracy theories.

Not all the popular literature on the assassination attempted a full return to the evidentiary groundwork established by the early Warren Commission critics. While the other works of the early-to-mid 1980s had consisted of elements of 1970s paranoia, investigative journalist Henry Hurt's *Reasonable Doubt* (1985) leaned heavily toward the idea that the conspiracy represented the work of an unseen political evil. In his book, Hurt stated the assassination had taken the country in a sinister direction.²¹ Hurt wrote nostalgically about the Kennedy era, saying "John Kennedy's greatest contribution was

¹⁷ Michael L. Kurtz, *Crime of the Century: The Kennedy Assassination from a Historian's Perspective*, 3rd ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013), 216. Although he believes that the evidence supports conspiracy, Kurtz admits that the identities of the assassins remains unknown.

¹⁸ Kurtz, *Crime of the Century*, 69, 75, 207-212. Kurtz writes that the Warren Commission critics never sufficiently proved the single-bullet theory incorrect and that no available evidence indicates the president's throat wound as being a wound of entry. He also devotes an entire section to debunking author David Lifton's claims of post-mortem surgery performed on the president's body to hide conspiracy evidence.

¹⁹ Kurtz, preface to *Crime of the Century*, xcvi-xcvii.

²⁰ Kurtz, *Crime of the Century*, 186-187.

²¹ Henry Hurt, introduction to *Reasonable Doubt: An Investigation into the Assassination of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1985), 11-12.

that he opened the mind of America to the possibilities of what might be.”²² Hurt articulated popular sentiments in the wake of the disastrous Vietnam War and the political scandals of the 1970s. He wrote that President Kennedy’s assassination altered the course of modern American history. The alleged conspirators not only murdered the president but also the concept of truth between the public and its government.²³

Hurt further conjured up memories of 1970s conspiracy theories by outlining his supposed contact with a convicted criminal and alleged conspirator named Robert Easterling. Easterling’s involvement in the assassination stemmed from making acquaintance with a group of anti-Castro Cubans angered by Kennedy’s handling of the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion. Working as an informant for the CIA and the FBI, Easterling allegedly attempted to inform United States intelligence of the president’s imminent assassination one day prior to the event. The informant also confirmed details of the assassination itself to Hurt that supported claims of conspiracy.²⁴ In his last interview with the alleged conspirator, Easterling remorsefully reflected on his inability to stop the assassination. He told Hurt that he was “...just as guilty as if I had pulled the trigger myself.”²⁵ This level of sensationalism brought back memories of *Appointment in Dallas* with its spy-thriller intrigue.²⁶

In his five-hundred-page tome, Hurt also evaluated the state of the conspiracy community and its roots starting in the wake of the publication of the Warren

²² Hurt, introduction to *Reasonable Doubt*, 3. On the same page, Hurt chastises both Presidents Johnson and Nixon for lacking the humanity and honesty that Kennedy allegedly possessed.

²³ Hurt, *Reasonable Doubt*, 429-430.

²⁴ Hurt, 346, 353-356, 375-376, 381-382. According to Easterling, an acquaintance and conspirator named “Manuel” told him that an Oswald double was positioned in the Texas School Book Depository and that all shots were fired from behind the president’s limousine. Easterling also claimed that Clay Shaw and David Ferrie were part of the conspiracy.

²⁵ Hurt, *Reasonable Doubt*, 391.

²⁶ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 132.

Commission Report. Hurt pointed out the contradictory state of the community and its doubt of established evidence. He wrote, “it is unlikely that the full truth about the Kennedy assassination will ever be known.”²⁷ Hurt evaluated the works of the conspiracists themselves. He sharply critiqued David Lifton’s theory of body alteration as outlined in 1980’s bestseller *Best Evidence*.²⁸ Hurts’ disharmony toward other assassination theorists showed the divide that existed in the community even when theories supported an intricate plot to kill President Kennedy.

By using the somewhat ambiguous nature of the evidence to balance their claims of conspiracy, the conspiracists utilized the apparent existence of a dark and treacherous plot to formulate a new assassination narrative that emphasized a powerful and important struggle over the soul of the country, its ideals, and its people. The perpetrators of the assassination represented a vast and nefarious network of individuals intent on crushing the idealized American way of life. The assassination transformed into a narrative based around subjective American ideals of good and evil on both a domestic and international level. In many ways, the conspiracists mirrored the rhetoric of Reagan-era political posturing. As noted by Professor Philip Jenkins in his book *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America*, President Reagan developed a distinctive moral dichotomy between America and its enemies, particularly the Soviet Union, that proved popular among Americans. The Cold War against the Soviet Union represented more than an international struggle but a complex moral battle in which

²⁷ Hurt, *Reasonable Doubt*, 392.

²⁸ Hurt, *Reasonable Doubt*, 423-428. Hurt believes that the president’s body may have undergone a cursory examination prior to the official autopsy at Bethesda Naval Hospital which may have resulted in the differing recollections of the president’s wounds. Hurt ultimately doubts Lifton’s claims that the examination was nefarious.

American values had to win out over the communists.²⁹ In many regards, the conspiracy theorists mimicked the popular trend set by President Reagan and the rise of the Moral Majority. To conspiracy theorists in the 1980s, the struggle for truth in the Kennedy assassination represented an almost spiritual conflict of national and personal identity versus an evil, ruling power set on obliterating the American way of life.

The Mock Trial of the Century

In 1986, cable television provided a unique and reality-bending entry into the Kennedy assassination narrative. Twenty-three years after the assassination, Lee Harvey Oswald finally went on trial and faced a jury for the murder of President Kennedy. However, the criminal proceedings against Oswald were not under direct legal pretenses. Instead, the trial against President Kennedy's alleged assassin occurred in a courtroom that amounted to little more than a film set visible to millions of viewers on television. Including real witnesses, attorneys, and a trial judge, Showtime's *On Trial: Lee Harvey Oswald* represented not so much the legal trial of an individual but provided both Warren Commission supporters and conspiracy theorists with a colorful and dramatic venue to defend their beliefs.

On Trial: Lee Harvey Oswald proved a lavish and intricate production. Originally produced by London Weekly Television and consisting of over twenty-one hours of testimony, it aired on Showtime in an abridged five-and-a-half-hour version on November 21, 1986.³⁰ Filming took place in both London and Dallas. Important assassination witnesses, a jury, and a judge from Dallas, Texas were selected to be part of

²⁹ Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 209-212. Jenkins notes that Reagan creatively utilized this morality focus to convince Americans to fund rearmament against the Soviets. Following his assassination attempt in 1981, Reagan felt as if he had been personally chosen by a higher power to defeat communism.

³⁰ John Corry, "Showtime Stages 'Trial' Of Lee Harvey Oswald," *The New York Times*, C29.

the proceedings. The producers placed a cardboard cutout of Oswald in the courtroom as well. The selection of the attorneys to represent both the prosecution and defense proved important to the weight and seriousness of the program. The production team hired famed Los Angeles County prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi to represent the prosecution. For Oswald's defense, the producers employed Gerry Spence, a colorful and popular defense attorney, to represent Oswald.³¹

Although billed as a judgment of Oswald, the television mock trial represented a battle between the official narrative and the many conspiracy theories that had arisen since the president's death. In many ways, both Bugliosi and Spence became effigies for their respective positions on the assassination. Bugliosi, upholding the official government explanation that Oswald had acted alone, proceeded to cross-examine assassination witnesses with pointed and precise questions. The prosecuting attorney's game plan followed closely to the previous Warren Commission investigation. Bugliosi demonstrated that the conspiracy theories which implicated anyone beside Oswald had little to no evidence to support their claims. He attempted to show that both hard and circumstantial evidence, including scientific examination of the rifle and its ammunition, implicated Oswald as the assassin.³² Bugliosi occasionally veered into snide and condescending language when questioning witnesses. An exchange with pathologist and conspiracy theorist Dr. Cyril Wecht ended in both Wecht and Bugliosi angrily shouting at each other over the plausibility of the single-bullet theory.³³

³¹ Steve Schneider, "Bringing Lee Harvey Oswald to 'Trial,'" *The New York Times*, 30.

³² *On Trial: Lee Harvey Oswald*, directed by Ian Hamilton (1986; Washington D.C.: MPI Media Group, 2008), DVD.

³³ Corry, "Showtime Stages 'Trial' of Lee Harvey Oswald," C29; *On Trial: Lee Harvey Oswald*, DVD.

In contrast to Bugliosi, Gerry Spence's performance as Oswald's defense attorney mostly avoided the confrontational nature of Bugliosi's cross-examinations. Spence adopted a warm and friendlier demeanor when examining witnesses on the stand. Unlike Bugliosi's evidentiary approach to the case, Spence focused his attention on manipulating the jury by utilizing a more emotional approach. Like earlier conspiracy theorists, he attempted to focus more on doubt than definitive evidence of Oswald's innocence. Spence claimed Oswald was involved with several intelligence agencies that could have likely framed him. He showed the jury the Zapruder film and focused on the powerful image of President Kennedy's head being thrown backward as if shot from the front. Echoing the recent work of assassination author David Lifton, Spence even questioned the validity of the president's autopsy. In many ways, Spence's defense of Oswald acted as an amalgam of conspiracy theories instead of a direct plea of the defendant's innocence.³⁴

Along with the surreal courtroom experience, the verdict returned by the jury also proved sensational. After a brief deliberation, the jury found Oswald guilty of the murder of President Kennedy. At the end of the program, a title card stated that, along with their belief in the defendant's guilt, an overwhelming majority of the jury also felt Oswald had not conspired with others to kill the president.³⁵ Whether the jury had been convinced of Oswald's guilt based on minute study of the objective evidence or the expert showmanship of the famed legal counsel involved remained unclear; however, the jury's verdict stood in direct contrast with widespread public thought on the assassination

³⁴ *On Trial: Lee Harvey Oswald*, DVD.

³⁵ *On Trial: Lee Harvey Oswald*, DVD; Richard Zoglin, "Video: What If Oswald Had Stood Trial?," *Time*, December 1, 1986, accessed on September 27, 2019, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,962995,00.html>.

during the 1980s. A 1983 Gallup poll demonstrated that seventy-four percent of the United States population believed a conspiracy had killed the president. Although these numbers were down from the previous decade, conspiracy still dominated the assassination narrative.³⁶ Regardless of these numbers, the television production *On Trial: Lee Harvey Oswald* added a new dimension to the case and suggested that American thought on the assassination was surprisingly pliable.

As the twenty-fifth anniversary of President Kennedy's murder approached, a renewed interest in the assassination continued to build, fueled by both contemporary events and nostalgia. The Iran-Contra scandal of 1986 and 1987 occurred during President Reagan's second term and elicited unpleasant memories of the political subterfuge of the early 1970s. The accusations that linked the Reagan administration to the illegal sale of weapons to Iranian terrorists in order to illegally fund anti-communist Central American guerillas stoked the fires of conspiracy.³⁷ Economic factors also contributed to instability. The perceived economic prosperity and dominance of the Reagan administration shifted to recession by the time that President George H.W. Bush took office, affecting millions of middle-class Americans.³⁸ The Reagan administration plunged billions of United States dollars into defense and military programs against the Soviet Union and foreign dictators.³⁹ Interventionist policies sparked discussion amongst

³⁶ "Gallup Poll, 10/83," in Sheldon Appleton, "Trends: Assassinations," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 514; accessed on September 5, 2019. The polls indicate a seven percent drop in conspiracy belief between 1976 and 1983. Intriguingly, the percentage of applicants answering "not sure" rose six percentage points.

³⁷ Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 207-213.

³⁸ Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 166-170, 202-204.

³⁹ Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 200. The Reagan administration funneled over two trillion dollars into military and defense programs between 1981 and 1988.

the general public still reeling from conflicts of the previous decade and reevaluating the United States' place in world hegemony.⁴⁰

The uncertain political, economic, and social prosperity of 1980s America led many Americans to reappraise and question how the country ended up in its current state. The promises of a Post-World War II America, an era of idealized peace and economic success, seemed far from reality. Many Americans began to look back on the Kennedy years with nostalgia as the promises of the cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s remained unfulfilled. The charisma and excitement of the Kennedy era stood in stark contrast to the endless conflicts and unrest that still pervaded American life daily. The baby boomers who came of age in the wake of President Kennedy's murder now had to watch their children grow up in a country that should have been shaped by ideas that died on the streets of Dallas on November 22, 1963. The torch had been passed to a new American generation who viewed Kennedy's legacy in a different light; instead, conspiracy theories formed the prism through which many young Americans viewed the assassination. This further allowed the Kennedy assassination to drift into modern mythology and conspiracy to seep into national consciousness.

The Resurrection of Jim Garrison

Following the disastrous Clay Shaw trial in 1969, Jim Garrison remained a polarizing figure to assassination researchers. The damage Garrison and his public debacle in court inflicted on the momentum of the conspiracists remained present in the fractured nature of the conspiracy assassination research community going into the 1980s. Garrison himself remained somewhat of a black sheep amongst the research

⁴⁰ Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 202.

community and the press.⁴¹ However, as the Kennedy assassination narrative steered further into one defined by conspiracy, Garrison reemerged. As the lingering suspicion that factions within the United States government conspired to kill the President became further engrained in American consciousness following the events of the mid 1970s, opinions of Garrison shifted. Researchers began to reappraise Garrison's contributions, many believing he had been correct about the conspiracy all along. As the twenty-fifth anniversary of the assassination loomed on the horizon, Jim Garrison's place in assassination lore shifted from scornful embarrassment to conspiracy hero.

Following a long and controversial political career, Jim Garrison wrote *On the Trail of the Assassins: My Investigation and Prosecution of the Murder of President Kennedy* in 1988. Although he had previously written about the subject of the assassination in a 1970 book entitled *A Heritage of Stone*, 1988's *On the Trail of the Assassins* offered Garrison's complete and unfiltered autobiographical account of the Clay Shaw trial and his own investigation into the president's murder in the mid-1960s. In his book, Garrison portrayed himself as an incorruptible figure fighting for truth and justice against the forces within the federal government that he alleged were behind the conspiracy.⁴² Garrison expanded his previous claims of the responsible parties for President Kennedy's assassination. Garrison infused his narrative with further allusions to the Vietnam conflict and Post-Watergate America. He still saw the assassination as the result of a large cabal of individuals but continued to expand its web. To Garrison, the

⁴¹ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 125; Posner, *Case Closed*, 448-450. Posner also details how Garrison continued to attack Clay Shaw after the infamous 1969 trial. Mired in lawsuits and mounting debt, Posner writes that "Shaw died in 1974, of cancer, a broken man."

⁴² Jim Garrison, introduction to *On the Trail of the Assassins: My Investigation and Prosecution of the Murder of President Kennedy* (New York: Sheridan Square Press, 1988), xiv-xvi.

main architects of the conspiracy consisted of the military-industrial complex that had controlled the interests of the nation since the end of the Second World War.⁴³

Garrison believed President Kennedy had been a threat to the military-industrial complex due to his objection of clandestine CIA activities against Cuba and refusal to escalate the war against communism in Southeast Asia.⁴⁴ Continuing to expand the web of the conspiracy against the President, the book also depicted members of the Warren Commission as active participants in the cover up. The commission's controversial single-bullet theory became an intentional fraud to protect the presence of multiple shooters. Garrison accused the commission of existing solely to find Oswald guilty of the crime. He also alleged that United States intelligence controlled the mainstream media and continued to protect the conspiracy.⁴⁵

Garrison fashioned Oswald into a secret agent not far removed from a spy thriller novel. Oswald, according to Garrison, intentionally posed as a communist sympathizer and had ties to both the CIA and the FBI. Garrison alleged Oswald, disguised as a Marxist, infiltrated both Russian and New Orleans circles, gathering intelligence on the Soviet Union and Cuba. Garrison believed Oswald had been setup by members of the intelligence community to take the blame for the president's murder without his consent or knowledge.⁴⁶ He even believed Oswald may have attempted to thwart the assassination and save President Kennedy's life. Garrison transformed Oswald into a

⁴³ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 276-280.

⁴⁴ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 175-178.

⁴⁵ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 282-284. Garrison refers to the media's support of the lone gunman hypothesis as "propaganda."

⁴⁶ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 65-70, 278-279. In his book, Garrison revived claims that Oswald had been impersonated. Garrison believes that an Oswald double attempted to implicate Oswald by visiting the Soviet and Cuban embassies in Mexico City during the summer of 1963.

damaged American hero acting in the interests of the nation.⁴⁷ *On the Trail of the Assassins* metamorphosized Oswald's portrayal once again.

Garrison's reappraisal of the Kennedy assassination in *On the Trail of the Assassins* deliberately pandered to Americans still dealing with the cultural fallout of the 1960s and 1970s. The heroes of *On the Trail of the Assassins* represented virtuous individuals fighting against an unsympathetic and corrupt system that did not have the American peoples' best interests in mind. Garrison portrayed President Kennedy as an idealistic force of change who threatened the established political order.⁴⁸ Although patriotic and dedicated, Oswald became a sacrificial lamb for the conspiracy in Garrison's assassination narrative.⁴⁹ In effect, Garrison suggested that thousands of Americans who died serving their country in Vietnam were also victims of the conspiracy. Garrison also repurposed himself as a courageous defender of truth, unflappable in exposing a vast government conspiracy. The heroes of Garrison's story upheld distinct and idealized American qualities that emphasized the struggle between the United States government and the individual in American society during the latter half of the twentieth century.

Following its publication, *On the Trail of the Assassins* became an immediate bestseller. Garrison found his image in assassination research circles transformed. Instead of the derision that had been heaped upon him in the previous decade, assassination researchers embraced Garrison's convoluted version of the assassination. However, the acceptance of

⁴⁷ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 220-227. Garrison based this claim partially on the revelation of Dallas FBI agent James Hosty. Hosty reported that his superiors ordered him to destroy a document given to the FBI by Oswald. The contents of the note remain unknown.

⁴⁸ Garrison, introduction to *On the Trail of the Assassins*, xii, xv-xvi. Garrison wistfully recalled that, "[Kennedy's] adoption of a more enlightened, less polarized view of the earth and its inhabitants, I believe, may have led John Kennedy to his death."

⁴⁹ Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 278.

Garrison's conspiracy theories arose from a changed social and political climate rather than actual evidence of conspiratorial involvement in the president's death. When Garrison made his initial claims of conspiracy during his investigation, roughly two-thirds of the country entertained the idea that others beside Oswald were involved in the Kennedy assassination.⁵⁰ Following the Clay Shaw trial, that number gained significantly after the collapse of the Vietnam War and the implications of Watergate. Garrison wrote and published *On the Trail of the Assassins* at a period when most Americans overwhelmingly believed that President Kennedy had died as the result of a conspiracy.⁵¹ The success of the book and its contents hinged on American public opinion and feelings. Twenty-five years later, the assassination still provoked intense feelings of nostalgia toward the slain president. In the interim years since the assassination, President Kennedy became a martyr and his death represented an irreparable shift in the nation's trajectory.⁵² Garrison's elaborate explanation for the president's murder fed from this nostalgia and provided distinct meaning: President Kennedy died defending American principles and its people. The subtext of Garrison's work functioned as a call to action for the American people to expose the conspiracy and even as it validated public distrust in the government.

The Third Wave

The publication of Jim Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins* aided in revitalizing the Kennedy assassination market. Books, articles, and publications flooded bookstores and the media in the wake of Garrison's bestselling book and the twenty-fifth

⁵⁰ "Harris Poll, 9/67" in Appleton, "Trends: Assassinations," 514.

⁵¹ "CBS/NYT Poll, 10/88" in Appleton, "Trends: Assassinations," 514.

⁵² James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 521-522.

anniversary of the assassination.⁵³ Reflecting American belief on the assassination, most of these publications leaned heavily toward conspiracy. For the most part, however, these publications offered little or no new evidence to suggest the involvement of others in the Kennedy assassination. Instead, most repeated the evidentiary base rooted in mid-1960s Warren Commission criticism. Like *On the Trail of the Assassins*, the conspiracy-laden accounts continued to alter the assassination narrative into a modern parable for the current state of the nation and the American peoples' place in it. The journey of the assassination from objective pursuit of justice to subjective social mythology was nearly complete.

Following in the footsteps of Garrison's popular autobiography *On the Trail of the Assassins*, Texas journalist Jim Marrs published *Crossfire* in 1989. Like other conspiracy publications created during the 1980s, Marrs' work represented an up-to-date summation of assassination conspiracy theories. Marrs' attempted to create a broader picture of the assassination in *Crossfire*. Although still mired in obsessive detail, the book focused more of its efforts on tying the charge of conspiracy to both physical evidence from the shooting and by speculating on the persons guilty of the crime. Like other conspiracy authors mirroring public opinion concerning the assassination, Marrs' version of the assassination narrative contained a garden variety of government agencies, the military, and the Mafia as the culprits behind the Kennedy murder.

Crossfire contained a number of glaring distortions and inaccuracies. Marrs continued to repeat outdated conspiracists claims concerning the single-bullet theory and

⁵³ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 135; For examples other than cited in this chapter, see: David E. Scheim, *Contract on America: The Mafia Murder of President John F. Kennedy* (New York: Shapolsky Publishers Inc., 1988); Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York: Penguin, 1988); Alan Adelson, *The Ruby-Oswald Affair* (Seattle: Romar Books, 1988).

the positioning of both President Kennedy and Governor Connally in the presidential limousine.⁵⁴ The book also relied on eyewitness testimony that was less than credible. Marris featured an interview with assassination eyewitness Jean Hill who claimed to have seen a gunman on the Grassy Knoll.⁵⁵ Hill's initial statements in 1963 conflicted with her later version of events.⁵⁶ In *Crossfire*, Marris also featured the testimonies of controversial eyewitnesses Beverly Oliver, Gordon Arnold, and Ed Hoffman despite little to no proof of their presence in or near Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963.⁵⁷ Marris also reported the discredited acoustics evidence from the HSCA investigation as proof of a Grassy Knoll shooter.⁵⁸ One portion of the book revived the possibility that Oswald had been replaced by an imposter.⁵⁹ Although it claimed to contain new information on the assassination, the book repackaged most conspiracy claims that existed since the first wave of Warren Commission criticism.

As with other conspiracy theories, Marris continued to accuse a shadow elite of orchestrating the president's murder. He implicated President Lyndon Johnson, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, the CIA, the "military-industrial complex," and bankers as having been involved in the plot to kill the president. Marris wrote, "President Kennedy was killed in a military-style ambush orchestrated by elements within the US government

⁵⁴ Jim Marris, *Crossfire: The Plot that Killed Kennedy* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 458-460. Marris neglects to mention that Governor Connally's jump seat was positioned six inches inward from the door of the presidential limousine. Not only was Governor Connally to the left of President Kennedy, he was also at a lower elevation, making a downward trajectory of a shot through both Kennedy and Connally more probable.

⁵⁵ Marris, *Crossfire*, 37-38.

⁵⁶ John McAdams, *JFK Assassination Logic: How to Think About Claims of Conspiracy* (Potomac Books, 2011), 55-56. Hill's statements to both police and media indicate she heard as many as six shots and saw a man running.

⁵⁷ Marris, *Crossfire*, 35-36, 79-80, 83-85.

⁵⁸ Marris, *Crossfire*, 497-500. Like his contemporaries, Marris believed that the audio tapes may have been altered while in government possession.

⁵⁹ Marris, *Crossfire*, 521-529. Doubting the findings of medical examiners in 1980, Marris called for another disinterment of Oswald's body to set the record straight.

that included the military with the active assistance of organized crime.”⁶⁰ This viewpoint, of a conspiracy consisting of a cast of thousands, reflected the 1980s fear of a fundamentally evil and uncontrollable government. To conspiracists, the nefarious tentacles of the corrupt state continued to victimize the truth.

Marrs also summed up popular emotional sentiments on the president’s murder. To Marrs, President Kennedy represented a threat to the establishment. He speculated that if the president had lived, the woes of Vietnam and Watergate would not have occurred. On Kennedy’s overall legacy, Marrs wrote, “His presidency will be remembered, not for what he did, but for what he might have done.”⁶¹

Despite the drawing back of the Kennedy assassination narrative by members of the conspiracy camp, divisions still existed amongst researchers. One of the most significant dustups occurred between researchers Robert J. Groden and Harrison Edward Livingstone. Groden and Livingstone co-wrote a book entitled *High Treason: The Assassination of President Kennedy and the New Evidence of Conspiracy* in 1989, which encapsulated many of the prominent conspiracy theories that had arisen over the nearly three decades since the death of President Kennedy. The book also featured full color photographs of the assassination courtesy of Groden’s extensive photographic archive.

High Treason came across as yet another tired rehash of conspiracy theories. The book continued to question the validity of Kennedy assassination evidence. Despite the findings of the HSCA, Groden and Livingstone still touted the acoustics evidence as proof of a second shooter on the Grassy Knoll. Despite this claim, they cited the possibility that the tapes had been edited to obliterate proof of other assassins or shots.

⁶⁰ Marrs, *Crossfire*, 552-553.

⁶¹ Marrs, *Crossfire*, 554.

Echoing sentiments of evidence credibility, the authors claimed conspirators had removed or damaged crucial frames in the Zapruder film. Still, Groden and Livingstone believed the headshot sequence of the film indicated a frontal shot. Despite consistent accusations of evidence tampering, including visual manipulation of the president's autopsy photographs, the authors derided David Lifton's body-alteration theory. *High Treason* postulated that as many as ten shots were fired at the presidential motorcade. The authors implicated a nebulous list of conspirators that included "CIA controlled Cuban exiles, Organized Crime, and the Ultra Right Wing, with the support of some politically well-connected wealthy men...." Groden and Livingstone even suggested that a secret service agent riding in a follow-up car might have accidentally shot the president.⁶²

Following the publication of *High Treason*, Livingstone and Groden fell out of favor with each other. Both authors differed on their opinions of the authenticity of the president's autopsy and the Zapruder film. Livingstone even claimed Groden made unauthorized reproductions of color autopsy photographs, while working as an unpaid consultant for the HSCA investigation in the late-1970s, for personal and financial gain. The issue was compounded further when Groden sold color autopsy photographs to a tabloid newspaper for an estimated fifty-thousand dollars. Groden barred Livingstone from using any of his photographic materials in later publications. Livingstone and Groden continued to spar with each other into the 1990s.⁶³

⁶²Robert J. Groden and Harrison Edward Livingstone, *High Treason: The Assassination of President Kennedy and the New Evidence of Conspiracy* (New York: Berkley Books, 1989), 16-18, 38-41, 215-218, 246, 258-261, 421. The capitalization in the quote belongs to the original authors.

⁶³ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 210-212.

By the end of the 1980s, a collection of bestselling publications and documentaries revitalized the Kennedy assassination narrative. By drawing the assassination back to its essentials, conspiracy theories allowed the story to adapt and adhere to a new time period. Although forensic science and government investigations provided varying degrees of explanation for many of the conspiracy anomalies, conspiracy theorists continued to hammer the same points and ignore evidence to the contrary. Many conspiracy theorists and their supporters felt the evidence itself had been significantly corrupted while in the hands of federal institutions.⁶⁴ Despite the differences in years and the fading of memories, doubt and an evolving culture of conspiracy remained a crucial ingredient in keeping the conspiracy theories thriving.

Aside from popular publications, the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories became inescapable even on smaller screens. Television networks aired assassination related programming to boost ratings and take advantage of continued interest in the president's murder. Many of these programs showcased the grisly details of the Kennedy murder and the murky theories that surrounded it.⁶⁵ These television documentaries further engrained conspiracy ideology into the public lexicon.

A 1988 British production entitled *The Men Who Killed Kennedy* represented the most significant example of television documentary concerning the Kennedy assassination in the late 1980s. Originally produced for British Television by filmmaker Nigel Turner for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the president's murder, *The Men Who*

⁶⁴ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 99-100.

⁶⁵ Walter Goodman, "Assassination Theories," *The New York Times*, November 1, 1988, C22; Walter Goodman, "The Assassination, Contd.," *The New York Times*, November 15, 1988, C22. These two articles review three programs that tackled the Kennedy assassination around the twenty-fifth anniversary of the president's murder. Those programs are "Kwitny Report Special: The Kennedy Assassination," *American Expose: Who Murdered J.F.K.?*, and "Nova: Who Shot President Kennedy."

Killed Kennedy functioned as a visual record of a multitude of conspiracy theories that rose to prominence by the late-1980s. Filming on location in Dallas and utilizing interviews with both assassination eyewitnesses and experts, the documentary argued President Kennedy was murdered by a conspiracy involving elements of the United States government and organized crime.⁶⁶ The documentary also made the claim that Oswald was innocent of shooting both President Kennedy and Governor Connally.⁶⁷

The filmmakers of *The Men Who Killed Kennedy* presented evidence they felt established a conspiracy in the president's murder. By studying a faded Polaroid image taken within a fraction of a second after President Kennedy was fatally shot, assassination conspiracy theorists believed they had uncovered visual proof of a gunman on the Grassy Knoll. Presented for the first time in the documentary, the blowup of the image appeared to show a man dressed in a police uniform behind the picket fence. Dubbed "the badge man," the figure appeared to have a puff of smoke in front of the lower part of his face, which conspiracy theorists believed was a muzzle flash from a rifle. Two other figures also appeared to be in the image. One of these figures appeared to be standing next to "the badge man" and another appeared to be near the retaining wall where Abraham Zapruder was filming the assassination.⁶⁸

The producers of *The Men Who Killed Kennedy* believed that the figure behind the retaining wall was a witness named Gordon Arnold, who had come forward shortly after the formation of the HSCA in the mid-1970s. Arnold claimed he filmed the shooting

⁶⁶ "The Cover-Up," *The Men Who Killed Kennedy*, directed by Nigel Turner (1988; A&E Television Networks, 2002), DVD.

⁶⁷ "The Patsy," *The Men Who Killed Kennedy*, directed by Nigel Turner (1991; A&E Television Networks, 2002), DVD.

⁶⁸ "The Forces of Darkness," *The Men Who Killed Kennedy*, directed by Nigel Turner (1988; A&E Television Network, 2002), DVD.

from this location and had heard a rifle shot pass near his location as the president was struck in the head by a bullet. He claimed a man dressed in a police uniform had taken his film at gunpoint in the ensuing chaos following the shooting. The documentary attempted to validate Arnold's claim with another witness named Ed Hoffman, who claimed to have seen two gunmen behind the fence on the Grassy Knoll, and the testimony of Texas Senator Ralph Yarbrough, who saw someone in Arnold's general location.⁶⁹

The documentary made the claim that President Kennedy had been killed by a vast conspiracy featuring both elements of the United States government and organized crime. The producers alleged that a former Corsican drug smuggler named Christian David had identified the Grassy Knoll assassin as a professional contract killer named Lucien Sarti. By the time of the documentary series in 1988, Sarti was deceased and David imprisoned in France. *The Men Who Killed Kennedy* featured extensive interviews with David's attorney. The attorney asserted that David was willing to tell investigators about the assassination pending a plea agreement. The series also argued that Oswald had been framed for the murder of the president by the CIA. The documentary featured Jim Garrison and his New Orleans angle of the assassination as instrumental in establishing Oswald as a patsy.⁷⁰

Despite the sensationalism of the alleged photographic evidence and the possible Corsican connection, *The Men Who Killed Kennedy* rehashed conspiracy points that had been circulating amongst the research community since the weekend of the assassination. The documentary attempted to refute the single-bullet theory and presented the graphic

⁶⁹ "The Forces of Darkness," *The Men Who Killed Kennedy*. DVD.

⁷⁰ "The Forces of Darkness," *The Men Who Killed Kennedy*. DVD; "The Patsy," *The Men Who Killed Kennedy*. DVD.

headshot in the Zapruder film as evidence of a frontal shot to President Kennedy.⁷¹ Aside from eyewitness recollections, most of the assassination experts interviewed for the program were predominately biased toward conspiracy thinking.⁷² *The Men Who Killed Kennedy* stood as the antithesis of earlier major network programming that attempted to debunk conspiracy claims and uphold the government's claim that Oswald acted alone in assassinating the president.

The A&E network aired the five-episode series *The Men Who Killed Kennedy* for the first time in the United States starting on September 27, 1991. An advertisement in *The New York Times* claimed the documentary series featured evidence that would, "...expose the real killers of JFK." In the same issue, Walter Goodman criticized the size of the plot suggested in *The Men Who Killed Kennedy*. Goodman wrote that in spite of the supposed intricacy of the plot and number of individuals involved, no one had ever come forward.⁷³ Despite its high publicity, *The Men Who Killed Kennedy* proved controversial even amongst conspiracy researchers. Harold Weisberg, author of *Whitewash* and featured in the television series, later criticized the documentary as, "very, very bad."⁷⁴

Oliver Stone's *JFK*

The release of the film *JFK* in 1991 signaled the dawning of a new era of revised paranoia. The film represented a watershed moment for interpretations of the

⁷¹ "The Coup d'Etat," *The Men Who Killed Kennedy*, directed by Nigel Turner (1988; A&E Television Networks, 2002), DVD; "The Witnesses," *The Men Who Killed Kennedy*, directed by Nigel Turner (1991; A&E Television Networks, 2002), DVD.

⁷² *The Men Who Killed Kennedy* predominately featured interviews with notable conspiracy theorists Harold Weisberg, Dr. Cyril Wecht, L. Fletcher Prouty, and Robert Groden.

⁷³ Walter Goodman, "David and Ben Chat in Shirtsleeves," *The New York Times*, September 27, 1991, C30.

⁷⁴ Stone and Sklar, *JFK: The Book of the Film*, 266.

assassination. From this point forward, the Kennedy assassination became inseparable from both myth and entertainment. The theories and implications of the president's murder became cloaked in a tightly spun metaphorical garment of fact and fiction presented to the American people. The events rendered on celluloid reached both into the past and into the present American socio-political landscape, dominated by conspiracy thinking and distrust in federal institutions. The mountains of books, countless hours of lectures, and endless screenings of the Zapruder film by assassination critics culminated in a singular moment that brought the assassination into intense political and cultural focus. The assassination of President Kennedy became a parable to explain the current state of the nation going into the 1990s.

Oliver Stone's life experiences led to his interest in the Kennedy assassination. A decorated Vietnam veteran at a young age, Stone experienced disillusionment in American institutions following his military service. He soon found his footing in film school and embarked on a career that flirted with subjects of conspiracy, government distrust, and a profound sense of personal loss in American institutions. Stone wrote and directed *Platoon* (1986), a film recalling his own experiences as a combat soldier in Vietnam. Stone's *Platoon* depicted Vietnam as a hellish and unnecessary war. *Platoon* also garnered intense critical praise and reaction. Stone went on to direct other films that dealt with decaying American moral infrastructure including *Wall Street*, *Talk Radio*, and *Born on the Fourth of July*. After reading both Jim Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins* and Jim Marrs's *Crossfire*, Stone felt compelled to make a film about the Kennedy assassination.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 136-137; Michael Norman, "Platoon Grapples With Vietnam," *The New York Times*, December 21, 1986, H17-H18; Glenn Collins, "Oliver Stone Is Ready to Move On From

Stone recognized the importance of a central and effective protagonist in his Kennedy assassination narrative. Utilizing the basic narrative of Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins*, the film encompassed Jim Garrison's investigation into the Kennedy murder and the disastrous Clay Shaw Trial in 1969. Stone intended *JFK* to be a compendium of conspiracy ideas that had circulated around the assassination for nearly thirty years. Accordingly, Stone's version of Garrison became more of a composite character, encapsulating the varying beliefs of conspiracy theorists into one concise package.⁷⁶ Despite the legal and personal embarrassment Garrison's exposure heaped on the assassination community, Stone reimagined Garrison as a hero who was mostly correct in his conspiracy theorizing. Much like Garrison's autobiographical account, the screenplay of *JFK* creatively transformed Garrison into a principled crusader for truth and justice, standing up to powerful and unjust forces that operated outside the law. Stone's script depicted Garrison as a morally incorruptible family man, eliciting Capraesque images of wholesome American values. Popular film actor Kevin Costner was cast as Garrison, lending further credence to the fictional version of the New Orleans District Attorney portrayed as representative of ideals of American integrity.⁷⁷ Stone also depicted Oswald as an intelligence agent betrayed by a large, unseen conspiracy. Stone depicted conspirators forging photographs of Oswald with the murder weapon, as well as

Vietnam," *The New York Times*, January 2, 1990, C13, C20. In *The New York Times* article, Stone mentioned upon his return from Vietnam that he was shocked by, "people's totally, implacable, merciless indifference." Stone reminisced on his first visit to Vietnam since the end of the war by saying "I felt as if we were ghosts wandering through a landscape we'd inhabited a long time ago."

⁷⁶ William W. Phillips, "Reviewed Work: *JFK* by Oliver Stone," *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 3 (Dec. 1992): 1264, accessed on September 24, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2080959>.

⁷⁷ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 159.

allowing Jack Ruby to murder the accused assassin.⁷⁸ Oswald becomes as much a victim of the conspiracy as President Kennedy.

Stone also brought in several members of the conspiracy community to act as advisors on the film. He hired Robert Groden as a technical consultant, allowing Stone access to Groden's assassination photo library.⁷⁹ He worked closely with United States Colonel L. Fletcher Prouty, a former intelligence agent, who previously divulged information to the Rockefeller Commission in 1975 concerning CIA assassinations.⁸⁰ Prouty convinced Stone that President Kennedy's assassination was carried out by the United States military-industrial complex, a virtual cast of thousands, because Kennedy opposed further escalation in Vietnam. The theory supported claims that the cabal of individuals responsible for President's Kennedy's death continued to orchestrate other conspiracies and involvement in intricate plots.⁸¹ Prouty believed a massive cover up hid CIA involvement in the Iran-Contra scandal and the mysterious downing of Korean Air Flight 007.⁸² Stone overlooked Prouty's questionable connections to extreme right-wing groups and made Prouty's intensely paranoid theory central to *JFK*'s plot.⁸³

⁷⁸ *JFK: Director's Cut*, directed by Oliver Stone (1991, Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2008), Blu-ray.

⁷⁹ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 213. Groden also made several cameo appearances as characters in *JFK*. Of note, he appears as the projectionist who screens the Zapruder film in the pivotal courtroom scene of the film.

⁸⁰ "C.I.A. Plot to Kill Castro Described," *The New York Times*, April 30, 1975, 9.

⁸¹ Robert Sam Anson, "The Shooting of JFK," *Esquire*, November 1991, in Stone and Sklar, *JFK: The Book of the Film*, 218-219. Prouty had published a book entitled *The Secret Team: The CIA and Its Allies in Control of the United States and the World*. Anson notes that Stone also hired Prouty as a technical consultant for *JFK*.

⁸² L. Fletcher Prouty, "Iran-Contra Panel Got Out the Wrong Facts," *The New York Times*, September 4, 1987; L. Fletcher Prouty, "U.S. Role in Korean Jet Downing Merits Inquiry," *The New York Times*, February 8, 1988, A18. These articles only represent a small sampling of Colonel Prouty's conspiracy accusations. Prouty also claimed that the United States government hid knowledge of extraterrestrial visitors from the American public.

⁸³ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 137-138.

Despite Stone's assurance of a large-scale plot to assassinate the president, consisting of hundreds (if not thousands) of individuals, his film still needed a central villain. Following Garrison's book, Stone cast Clay Shaw as the villain in his film. The production cast veteran film actor Tommy Lee Jones as Shaw. The film portrayed Shaw as deceptive. On the surface, Shaw appeared as a bourgeois character, aristocratic, and even charming. However, under the surface, *JFK* portrayed Shaw as duplicitous, conniving, and a homosexual deviant.⁸⁴ Despite Shaw's placement as the perceptible antagonist in *JFK*, he only represents a small fraction of the overall conspiracy. Although part of upper-crust New Orleans society, Shaw is only an underling in a wider plot. In this effect, Stone makes the unseen hands of the federal government the central villain of *JFK*. The mostly unknown and concealed antagonists murder and intimidate witnesses. They bug Garrison's office and create strife within Garrison's close circle of trustees. Most importantly, the covert arms of the United States government continually killed or suppressed the truth to the American public.⁸⁵

JFK condensed a significant amount of Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories into a powerful narrative despite their sometimes contradictory and convoluted nature. Although various theories are peppered throughout *JFK*, Garrison, played by Costner, brings together most of these elements in both a fictitious meeting with a mysterious intelligence figure called "X," providing Garrison and the audience with the political motivation for Kennedy's murder, and a crucial but mostly exaggerated

⁸⁴ Michael Rogin, "JFK: The Movie," *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 2 (April 1992): 503-504, accessed January 18, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2165731>. Rogin explores the sexual politics of Stone's *JFK*, commenting that the film displays intense homophobic qualities.

⁸⁵ *JFK: Director's Cut*. Blu-ray.

courtroom summation during the prosecution of Clay Shaw.⁸⁶ These scenes represented a whirlwind mastery of film editing and direction in order to create a dense and seemingly plausible mosaic of conspiracy evidence.

JFK proved to be both technically and narratively impressive by intercutting both real historical footage and reenactments shot specifically for the film. Stone seamlessly blended both reality and fantasy in a singular vision of history and entertainment. The lavish production detail of the film mimicked the obsessive nature of the conspiracy theorists themselves. Stone painstakingly reconstructed the assassination in minute detail from multiple vantage points. He also distinctly copied the look and feel of real archival sources, including home movies of the president's murder, utilizing the same film stock as many of the primary materials, making them indistinguishable from the source to all but assassination experts. Stone exploited the powerful visual content of the Zapruder film in multiple aspects throughout his film, most notably as the dizzying and shocking crux to Garrison's assassination reconstruction in court. Through the use of close-ups of the fatal head shot and other dramatic elements, Stone intensely sought to convince audiences that the shot that killed Kennedy came from the Grassy Knoll.⁸⁷ In *JFK*, Stone narratively framed the Zapruder film as more than a historical record of an event, but as the most clear and relevant piece of evidence definitively proving President Kennedy died as the result of a conspiracy.

Ultimately, Stone's celluloid interpretation of the Kennedy assassination dangerously blurred the line between mass entertainment and propaganda. Stone used

⁸⁶ *JFK: Director's Cut*. Blu-ray. The character of "X" was based upon Colonel L. Fletcher Prouty and played by veteran actor Donald Sutherland.

⁸⁷ *JFK: Director's Cut*, Blu-ray.

assassination theories and evidence, including the shocking content of the Zapruder film, as a tool that extended beyond *JFK*'s narrative framework and attempted to reach toward contemporary audiences with a plea for action. In an editorial for *The Washington Post Outlook*, Stone wrote, "What I hope this film will do...is remind people how much our nation and our world lost when President Kennedy died, and to ask anew what might have happened and why. In the words of Thomas Jefferson, 'Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.'"⁸⁸ In many ways, Stone's actions mirrored that of his movie's protagonist, Jim Garrison. Even if sincere in his efforts of embellishing the events surrounding the assassination in order to bring out the ugly truth concerning the murder of Kennedy, Stone plastered the Zapruder film across theaters and public consciousness in a manner which Zapruder himself adamantly opposed when he initially sold his film in November 1963.⁸⁹

The central narrative of *JFK* portrays President Kennedy as standing in opposition to the military-industrial complex that secretly controls the country. He is depicted as a virtuous leader who vehemently opposes illegal CIA activities, war in Southeast Asia, and is an avid supporter of just causes, such as the Civil Rights Movement. The intelligence community manipulates Oswald into being a patsy for the conspiracy. The film depicted the president's murder in Dealey Plaza as the result of a triangulated crossfire in which teams of shooters, disguised as police officers and construction workers in both high-rise buildings and the Grassy Knoll, turn Elm Street into "a turkey shoot." After the assassination, the secret service absconds with the president's body back

⁸⁸ Oliver Stone, "Stone's *JFK: A Higher Truth?*," *The Washington Post Outlook*, June, 1991, in Stone and Skylar, *JFK: The Book of the Film*, 199.

⁸⁹ Alexandra Zapruder, *Twenty-Six Seconds: A Personal History of the Zapruder Film* (New York: Twelve, 2016), 86-90.

to Washington D.C. The president's autopsy is falsified to hide the true nature of the wounds to the body. Oswald is sacrificed to protect the conspiracy and killed by his acquaintance Jack Ruby, who was connected to the Mafia. President Lyndon B. Johnson gives approval for advanced military action in Southeast Asia, creating the Vietnam War.⁹⁰ The New Orleans angle of the story, with its intrigue of Anti-Castro Cubans, double agents, and the homosexual underworld, becomes a peripheral and somewhat minor component to the vast, overarching conspiracy.

Although the assassination is the focus of the screenplay, Stone's *JFK* became an epitaph for postwar American values more than to the slain President for which the film is named. Stone channeled many of Garrison's sentiments of nostalgia toward the Kennedy era into his work. *JFK* depicted the murder of the president as not only a political crime but a moral one. President Kennedy was killed so that the power elite could continue their control of American interests and wealth. To Stone, the ideals Kennedy stood for represented virtuous American values.⁹¹ The struggle for truth in the assassination became a battle of the individual against an oppressive and invisible ruling class. According to Stone's narrative in the film, the country after President Kennedy's assassination became essentially lost and corrupted, soaked in the darkened pitch of illicit powers obsessed with secrecy and greed.⁹²

Upon its release in late 1991, *JFK* proved immediately successful and highly controversial. In its first year, the film made over fifty million dollars at the box office,

⁹⁰ *JFK: Director's Cut*. Blu-ray.

⁹¹ Oliver Stone, "Via the Director's Viewfinder," *The New York Times*, December 22, 1991, B4. In this article, Stone refers to President Kennedy as "a figure of hope and idealism to the American people."

⁹² Oliver Stone, "Who is Rewriting History?," A35; William Grimes, "What Debt Does Hollywood Owe to Truth?," *The New York Times*, March 2, 1992, C22. Stone refers to the government as "a single-party superstate with its own cold-war religion, police and culture."

eventually culminating in a total haul of two-hundred-million dollars.⁹³ *JFK* also received eight Academy Award nominations.⁹⁴ Stone aggressively promoted his film, appearing on several high-profile talk shows, and became a guru amongst the conspiracy community.⁹⁵ In contrast, many mainstream journalists reacted negatively toward Stone's magnum opus on the Kennedy assassination. Major publications such as *The New York Times* slammed Stone and his film in several high-profile articles.⁹⁶ *The Washington Post* wrote a scathing article on *JFK*, in which veteran political pundit George F. Will referred to Stone as, "...an intellectual sociopath, indifferent to truth."⁹⁷ Critics panned Stone for ignoring objective history and constructing deliberate embellishment.

The film struck a nerve as many felt that Stone had effectively placed the importance of interpretive art over true history.⁹⁸ Stone defended *JFK* as a complex and socially relevant countermyth to what he perceived as the fantasy of the Warren Commission Report. Author Peter Knight compared Stone's treatment of *JFK* to the 1950 Akira Kurosawa film *Rashomon*, with its conflicting viewpoints.⁹⁹ Although Stone admitted to taking some liberties with facts, he justified his actions as "a battle between

⁹³ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 141. Warner Brothers also initiated an aggressive multi-million-dollar campaign in defense of *JFK*. Promotional movie trailers and television advertisements featured the tagline, "the story that won't go away."

⁹⁴ Bernard Weinraub, "'Bugsy' a Big Winner In Oscar Nominations Rife With Surprise," *The New York Times*, February 20, 1992, C15, C23.

⁹⁵ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 142.

⁹⁶ For a few notable examples, see Tom Wicker, "Does J.F.K. Conspire Against Reason?," *The New York Times*, December 15, 1991, H1; Bernard Weinrub, "Hollywood Wonders If Warner Brothers Let 'J.F.K.' Go Too Far," *The New York Times*, December 24, 1991, C9; Gary Trudeau, "Overkill," *The New York Times*, January 10, 1992, A19; David W. Belin, "Earl Warren's Assassins," *The New York Times*, March 7, 1992, 25;

⁹⁷ George F. Will, "'JFK': Paranoid History," *The Washington Post*, December 26, 1991, accessed on September 23, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1991/12/26/jfk-paranoid-history/1353d5cd-9d26-4088-acf7-d3ba5a0f8a0d/>.

⁹⁸ For a large collection of both criticism and praise of Oliver Stone's *JFK* from multiple print sources, see Stone and Skylar, *JFK: The Book of the Film*.

⁹⁹ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 157-158.

official mythology and disturbing truth.”¹⁰⁰ Stone believed most American history contained distortions and falsehoods.¹⁰¹

Behind the guise of truth, *JFK* unleashed more fears of treacherous, internal enemies onto mainstream culture. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s left the United States without a powerful external enemy.¹⁰² In the vacuum created by the Soviet collapse, Cold War tensions and fears of cultural degeneracy redirected toward previous flights of national paranoia and suspicion. *JFK* revived paranoia over an unseen and immoral shadow government within the United States. In pseudo-documentary style, Stone visually articulated a powerful and subversive perversion of American institutions, compounding further erosion of trust. *JFK* made the assassination relevant to a 1990s audience living in a nation still defined by its secrecy and its suspicions of government.¹⁰³ The socially subjective components of the *JFK* narrative overpowered any supposed call for objectivity.

Aside from the conspiratorial accusations in *JFK*, the film also kick-started new discussions and interpretations of the Kennedy administration, particularly President Kennedy’s handling of the Vietnam War. Stone’s film, coupled with recent works by other historians, argued that President Kennedy stood in direct opposition to further escalation and military action in Vietnam.¹⁰⁴ Kennedy’s alleged pacifism and opposition

¹⁰⁰ Robert Scheer, “Cover Story: Oliver Stone Builds His Own Myths: The filmmaker has touched some very raw nerves--again. But now, with ‘JFK,’ it’s big-time history he’s messing with,” *The Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 1991, accessed on November 13, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-12-15-ca-926-story.html>.

¹⁰¹ William Grimes, “What Debt Does Hollywood Owe to Truth?,” C15, C22. Stone took his doubts even further than questioning the narratives in American history books. According to Grimes, Stone told a Manhattan townhall audience, “I don’t even know if I was born or who my parents were.”

¹⁰² Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 197.

¹⁰³ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 256-257.

¹⁰⁴ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “JFK: Truth and Fiction,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 10, 1992, in Stone and Skylar, *JFK: The Book of the Film*, 394; Oliver Stone, “Speech to the National Press Club,”

to conflict formulated major portions of conspiracy lore, providing a motive for his execution by members of the so-called military-industrial complex. Scholars supportive of the theory of Kennedy as a pacifist cited a document, entitled NSAM 263, in which the president called for the immediate withdrawal of one thousand United States advisors by December 1963.¹⁰⁵ They also cited comments made by the president, both personal and on television, including an interview with Walter Cronkite in which Kennedy expressed growing dissatisfaction in Vietnam. Stone's film and conspiracy theorists also named a document issued by President Johnson only four days after the president's death, entitled NSAM 273, that allegedly greenlit further United States involvement in Vietnam.¹⁰⁶

However, other scholars vehemently attacked this position, claiming Kennedy was a committed cold warrior in the conflict against communism. In 1993's *Rethinking Camelot: JFK, the Vietnam War, and US Political Culture*, Noam Chomsky argued Kennedy had no intention of leaving Vietnam. He argued that NSAM 263, calling for the withdrawal of United States military personnel, was composed because Kennedy had been convinced by his advisors that the war in Vietnam was going in favor of United States' allies.¹⁰⁷ Historian James Patterson also observed that the advisors mentioned in Kennedy's withdrawal plan were not involved in combat operations but construction.¹⁰⁸

January 15, 1992, in Stone and Skylar, *JFK: The Book of the Film*, 406-407; John Newman, "The 'Gimmick' in J.F.K.'s Vietnam Withdrawal Plan," *The Boston Globe*, January 14, 1992, in Stone and Skylar, *JFK: The Book of the Film*, 402. This represents a small sampling of articles related to this topic.

¹⁰⁵ McGeorge Bundy, "National Security Action Memorandum No. 263," October 11, 1963, in Stone and Skylar, *JFK: The Book of the Film*, 537.

¹⁰⁶ McGeorge Bundy, "National Security Action Memorandum No. 273," November 26, 1963, in Stone and Skylar, *JFK: The Book of the Film*, 540-542; Peter Dale Scott, *Deep Politics, and the Death of JFK* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 24-28. Oliver Stone, "Who Is Rewriting History?," A35; *JFK: Director's Cut*, Blu-ray.

¹⁰⁷ Noam Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot: JFK, the Vietnam War, and US Political Culture* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 1993), 95-99.

¹⁰⁸ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 516.

Chomsky and other scholars noted the wording in the Johnson memo, NSAM 273, strongly resembled an earlier draft composed on November 20, 1963, when President Kennedy was still alive.¹⁰⁹ Also, the speech which Kennedy was supposed to have given at the Dallas Trade Mart, on the day of the assassination, reaffirmed the president's staunch opposition to communist expansion across the globe.¹¹⁰

Outside of both critical and academic circles, Stone's *JFK* provoked an enormous public reaction. Stone's sensational and sentimental tribute to the loss of President Kennedy and the apparent confirmation of a government-led plot against the people of the United States provided the conspiracy movement with a breakthrough moment not seen in nearly fifteen years. Most importantly, *JFK* urged its audiences to ask for the truth in the Kennedy assassination through action and disclosure. In *JFK*, Garrison's final courtroom summation effectively breaks the fourth wall, speaking directly to 1990s audiences. Costner, as Garrison, argues that the government's refusal of truth threatens the entire foundation of the country. He emotionally pleads that, "The truth is the most important value we have because if the truth does not endure, if the government murders truth, you cannot respect the hearts of its people."¹¹¹ Stone noted that thousands of sealed documents, pertaining to the president's death and Lee Harvey Oswald, remained locked away by the federal government.¹¹² Many, including witnesses to the assassination itself,

¹⁰⁹ Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot*, 105-108. According to Arthur Schlesinger, President Johnson believed he was following Kennedy's lead on Vietnam following the assassination.

¹¹⁰ John F. Kennedy, "Remarks Prepared for Delivery at the Trade Mart in Dallas, TX, November 22, 1963 [Undelivered]," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed on September 22, 2019, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/dallas-tx-trade-mart-undelivered-19631122>. Regarding United States support of nations in danger of communist occupation such as Vietnam, the undelivered speech contains this statement, "Reducing our efforts to train, equip, and assist their armies can only encourage Communist penetration and require in time the increased overseas deployment of American combat forces."

¹¹¹ Stone and Skylar, *JFK: The Book of the Film*, 177-179.

¹¹² Oliver Stone, "Who is Rewriting History?," A35.

saw the film as the motivator for full disclosure of assassination related materials. Upon the film's widespread release, G. Robert Blakey, former chief counsel of the HSCA, suggested that the government's remaining files should be released to the public.¹¹³

The activism calling for the release of the classified Kennedy assassination files only increased in the months following the release of *JFK*. Stone made a dramatic appearance on the main stage of the Democratic National Convention in 1992 and urged the United States government to release the remaining files on the assassination.¹¹⁴ Congress conceded to pleas of disclosure and passed the JFK Act, which later became known as "The President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992."¹¹⁵ By August 1993, over ninety thousand files were publicly released.¹¹⁶ Aside from preparing files for release to the public, the act sanctioned the creation of the Assassination Records Review Board (ARRB). The ARRB found that the federal government further compounded matters by keeping the documents secret. The files freed by the ARRB contained no smoking gun or bombshell evidence to implicate a wide-spread conspiracy.¹¹⁷ Regardless of the results, the widespread activism unleashed by the *JFK* film made the assassination a relevant and political-charged event that refused to fade into the history books.

Case Closed

¹¹³ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 288-289. Despite his call for transparency, Blakey criticized *JFK* as "evil."

¹¹⁴ Andrew Rosenthal, "The Ups and Downs of Going Over the Top," *The New York Times*, July 16, 1992, A12.

¹¹⁵ "'J.F.K.' May Elicit Action On Files," *The New York Times*, January 11, 1992, 6; G. Robert Blakey, "J.F.K. Assassination Records Still Secret," *The New York Times*, May 9, 1993, 14.

¹¹⁶ Tim Weiner, "Papers on Kennedy Assassination Are Unsealed, and '63 Is Revisited," *The New York Times*, August 24, 1993, A1, A11.

¹¹⁷ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 289-290; Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 146-147. The ARRB eventually released over sixty thousand documents before its end in 1997.

Despite the prevailing public attitude invigorated by Oliver Stone's *JFK*, supporters of the findings of the official investigations continued to fight back. The strongest argument against alleged conspiracy claims resulted from the work of Gerald Posner, a former Wall Street attorney and investigative author, in his 1993 critically acclaimed *New York Times* bestselling book entitled *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK*. Posner's *Case Closed* presented a succinct and sobering attack on conspiracy theories. *Case Closed* offered a strong intellectual and scientific counterargument against the popular assassination narrative.

Posner attacked the major pillars of the conspiracy narrative. Utilizing the work of a computer graphics firm called Failure Analysis Inc., Posner scientifically demonstrated that a bullet fired from the Texas School Book Depository passed through both President Kennedy and Governor Connally. Posner also used the results from Failure Analysis to show that the assassin had over eight seconds to fire on the presidential motorcade, as opposed to six seconds as reported in the Warren Commission Report.¹¹⁸ Posner also refuted ear-witness claims of multiple shooters. In contrast to high numbers claimed by conspiracy theorists, Posner statistically demonstrated that only twelve percent of ear-witnesses heard a shot from the Grassy Knoll area of Dealey Plaza and less than five percent of total witnesses heard more than three shots.¹¹⁹

Posner also attacked the popular depiction of Lee Harvey Oswald as a patsy and criticized prominent members of the conspiracy community. He depicted Oswald as an unstable, asocial loner with delusions of grandeur. Posner believed that Oswald

¹¹⁸ Posner, *Case Closed*, 322, 333-334. Failure Analysis Inc. presented their scientific analysis of the assassination in a mock trial for the American Bar Association in 1992.

¹¹⁹ Posner, *Case Closed*, 235.

assassinated President Kennedy because Oswald, "...always thought he was smarter and better than other people, and was angered that others failed to recognize the stature he thought he deserved."¹²⁰ Posner labeled Jim Garrison as intensely paranoid and believed that Garrison targeted Shaw for prosecution because of Shaw's homosexuality.¹²¹ He scorned Oliver Stone's *JFK*, calling the film, "a blatant mix of fact and fiction."¹²² Posner criticized the conspiracy industry that raked in thousands of dollars.¹²³ To Posner, "The only casualty is truth, especially in a society where far too many people are content to receive all their knowledge on an important issue from a single article or a book."¹²⁴

Posner's *Case Closed* provided a serious blow to the assassination conspiracy theories. *The New York Times* issued a glowing review of Posner's book. The review noted that Posner's work, "is more satisfying than any conspiracy theory."¹²⁵ The book quickly became a bestseller, showcasing the public's continued interest in the assassination. Conspiracy theorists quickly attacked *Case Closed* and claimed Posner's book was riddled with inaccuracies.¹²⁶ Author Richard B. Trask noted another motive for negative attention to Posner's work. According to Trask, "there was a jealousy and a distaste that such a novice researcher into the assassination could garner so much

¹²⁰ Posner, *Case Closed*, 83-84, 202-203, 219-220.

¹²¹ Posner, *Case Closed*, 436, 445-446. Posner quotes Garrison as calling the Kennedy murder, "a homosexual thrill-killing."

¹²² Posner, *Case Closed*, 466.

¹²³ Posner, *Case Closed*, 467-468.

¹²⁴ Posner, preface to *Case Closed*, xv.

¹²⁵ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "Kennedy Assassination Answers," *The New York Times*, September 9, 1993, C18.

¹²⁶ Oliver Stone, "Another Case Closed," *The New York Times*, September 3, 1995, 10; Harold Weisberg devoted an entire book to deconstructing Posner, see: Harold Weisberg, *Case Open: The Omissions, Distortions, and Falsifications of Case Closed* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1994).

notoriety and probable riches in the creation of such a flawed work.” Regardless of attacks, Posner’s work continued to sell.¹²⁷

Into the Third Decade

Despite attempts by lone gunman supporters to support the official Kennedy assassination narrative, widespread belief in conspiracy remained the prominent point of view. Popular American culture continued to reflect an ethos of distrust utilizing the assassination as a unique social flashpoint. A multitude of conspiracy-angled books and films continued to flood the market in the wake of Oliver Stone’s *JFK* and the thirtieth anniversary of the president’s murder.¹²⁸ By the early 1990s, popular television programming referenced conspiratorial aspects of the assassination including an overall suspicion of nefarious government action against its people.¹²⁹ By blending together aspects of current socio-political issues and sensationalist entertainment, popular culture ultimately allowed conspiracy theories to thrive and assimilate their way into collective American consciousness.

The popular Kennedy assassination narrative that dominated the late 1980s and early 1990s conjured feelings of both suspicion and nostalgia. Such feelings continued to be nurtured and revitalized by political fears of war, secrecy, and government oversight

¹²⁷ Trask, *National Nightmare on Six Feet of Film*, 269. Trask criticizes Posner for not giving proper credit to Failure Analysis Inc. for their scientific work.

¹²⁸ For key examples of assassination literature released after *JFK*, see: Charles A. Crenshaw with Jens Hansen and J. Gary Shaw, *JFK Has Been Shot: A Parkland Hospital Surgeon Speaks Out* (New York: Pinnacle Books, 2013), originally published in 1992; Bill Sloan with Jean Hill, *JFK: The Last Dissenting Witness* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 1992); Bonnar Menninger, *Mortal Error: The Shot That Killed JFK* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992). Films such as *Ruby* and *In the Line of Fire* focused significantly on the assassination.

¹²⁹ Goldberg, *Enemies Within*, 144-145. Representing only a few examples, *The X-Files* featured an episode where the primary antagonist of the program shoots President Kennedy from a storm drain in Dealey Plaza in a flashback sequence. An episode of *Seinfeld* parodied Oliver Stone’s *JFK*, complete with mock-Zapruder film footage. Other television programs such as *Quantum Leap*, *The Simpsons*, and *Mystery Science Theater 3000* referenced the conspiratorial nature of the assassination.

into the lives of millions of Americans. Belief in conspiracy theories continued as Americans were unable to come to grips with the death of 1960s ideology and the promise of a nation that never was. The results of this potent mixture of fear and wistful remembrance made the search for objective truth in the assassination a nearly impossible task. By the 1990s, the doubts planted by conspiracy theorists undermined the validity of the assassination's evidentiary base. Apprehension and doubt became the only items linking both the infinite explanations and quibbling over the minutia of the assassination together. The assassination transformed from a concrete historical event into a personal Rorschach test of political, social, and cultural American iconography. By the third decade following the Kennedy assassination, the idea of conspiracy not only permeated American thought, it became instinctive.

November 22, 1993 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the Kennedy assassination. Observance of the event occurred across the country. At Arlington National Cemetery in Washington D.C., many, including the president's youngest brother Edward Kennedy, paid their respects at the president's grave. In Dallas, over four thousand people crowded into Dealey Plaza to mark the thirtieth anniversary of President Kennedy's death. Spectators, journalists, and assassination eyewitnesses mingled amongst the small park in downtown Dallas that had remained virtually unchanged since 1963.¹³⁰ Some visited the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza which occupied the

¹³⁰ Stephen Fagin, *Assassination and Commemoration: JFK, Dallas, and the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 158; David E. Rosenbaum, "30-Year Commemoration In Dallas and Arlington," *The New York Times*, 1A, 16A.

former Texas School Book Depository Building. Opened in 1989, over one million visitors had toured the museum's exhibits prior to the thirtieth anniversary.¹³¹

That same day, a monument was unveiled which commemorated Dealey Plaza as a nationally recognized historic site protected under federal law. Instead of being placed at the entrance of Dealey Plaza or near the former Texas School Book Depository Building, the bronze plaque was deposited in a more controversial location further down Elm Street. The monument was placed on the north side of Elm Street, along the sidewalk inside Dealey Plaza. Planners justified the position of the memorial, claiming it was closer to the site where President Kennedy was mortally wounded.¹³²

The monument's physical placement generated a degree of unintentional irony. Instead of facing Elm Street, the bronze memorial plate faced away from the painted, white "x" that denoted the site of President Kennedy's final moments. The alleged sniper's window on the sixth floor of the former Texas School Book Depository became peripheral to observers standing at the commemoration point. Instead, visitors read the monument's inscription facing the northern lawn of Dealey Plaza, viewing both the white cement structure of the north pergola and the tree-lined wooden picket fence. The plaque, commemorating the historical and cultural significance of Dealey Plaza as the site of the president's assassination, found its home directly in front of the Grassy Knoll.

¹³¹ Fagin, *Assassination and Commemoration*, 155-156. The museum notably features a nearly exact replica of the sniper's nest as it appeared on November 22, 1963. However, a glass partition restricts observers from looking out the sixth floor window where Oswald allegedly shot the president.

¹³² Fagin, *Assassination and Commemoration*, 157-158.

Conclusion: The Truth Shall Set You Free

In March 1994, over thirty years after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the Gallup Poll published their findings demonstrating the effect the assassination still held on the American public. The poll asked participants “What historical event that occurred during your lifetime do you remember most vividly?” Thirty percent answered with the Kennedy assassination. The next two most selected answers, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 and the United States moon landing on July 20, 1969, polled at less than half of the numbers as the Kennedy assassination at the number one spot. The assassination also trounced other selections such as the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan in March 1981.¹ Even after thirty years, the Kennedy assassination remained a definitive cultural marker in the minds of the American public.

Not only did Americans continue to remember President Kennedy’s tragic murder as a crucial point in United States history, they also continued to believe a conspiracy was responsible for his death. In November 1994, another Gallup poll indicated that seventy-five percent of Americans felt that others beyond Oswald were responsible for the president’s death. The identities of the conspirators remained a varied and colorful cast of characters including the Russians, the CIA, and the Mafia. Although Americans could not agree on the identities of those involved, most agreed a plot involving more than Lee Harvey Oswald resulted in the death of the president.²

¹ “Gallup Poll, 3/94,” in Sheldon Appleton, “Trends: Assassinations,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 513; accessed on September 5, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3078740>.

² “Gallup Poll, 11/94,” in Appleton, “Trends: Assassinations,” 515-516. Forty-three percent of participants answered “Don’t know/not sure” demonstrating the lack of consensus amongst conspiracy believers.

In the three decades following the president's murder, the American public's disbelief in the official version of the assassination systemically illustrated a growing trend of mounting distrust in federal institutions and a pervading culture of conspiracy that became commonplace by the end of the century. The Kennedy assassination functioned as a vanguard moment for conspiracy theories to captivate the American imagination. The president's murder formed a singular unifying event among millions of Americans of all ages, races, and creeds. Due to the event's shocking spontaneity and the incessant media coverage that followed, millions of Americans recalled the terrible moment when they heard the news of President Kennedy's death and the strong emotions they felt in its wake. These feelings, coupled with intense changes in American cultural, political, and social iconography, gave rise to a prevailing conspiracy-based narrative that mirrored contemporaneous events and reactions. This mythologized version of American history distilled elements of truth and speculation into a unique historiographic interpretation that bestowed meaning to both the president's death and justification for the paranoia-driven society that formed after it.

The Kennedy Assassination as Historiographical Pursuit

Historian Michael L. Kurtz, author of *Crime of the Century: The Kennedy Assassination from a Historian's Perspective*, wrote that academic study of the Kennedy assassination was necessary to decode the alleged mysteries behind the event.³ While he may have been referring to the actual mechanics of the assassination in Dealey Plaza, Kurtz's suggestion of academic scrutiny also lends itself well to the study of the creation of the assassination narrative. In the three decades following the president's death, the

³ Michael L. Kurtz, preface to *Crime of the Century: The Kennedy Assassination from a Historian's Perspective*, 3rd ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013), xevi.

theories and hypotheses that attempted to explain the mechanisms of the shooting and motivations for the president's murder mirrored many aspects that historians face in interpreting past events. Author John H. Arnold broadly defines the past as the era, or moment, in which an event occurred. He also refers to history as "a true story of something that happened...retold in the present."⁴ Viewed from a historiographical perspective, the development of the predominantly accepted Kennedy assassination conspiracy narrative not only attempts to reconstruct a past event but also reflects the state of the nation and the mentality of its people.

The eventual acceptance of Kennedy assassination theories in a broader, culturally relevant context rested less on truth and more on how American society perceived itself. Although both conspiracy theorists and supporters of the Warren Commission came to often wildly different conclusions concerning the assassination, both groups believed that they were pursuing a singular, objective truth. Pursuit of objective truth fractured into subjective interpretation as the turbulent political and cultural breakdown of the 1960s and 1970s intensified. The shifting and flexible nature of the conspiracy theories reflected the chaos of the eras in which they were created. In comparison, the more rigid and unflappable official version of events appeared unsympathetic and detached.

Most significantly, Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories provided a seemingly plausible explanation that linked the assassination with contemporaneous concerns and perceptions of late twentieth century America. Most of the conspiracy literature and media suggested some degree of class struggle, particularly the individual

⁴ John H. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3-4.

citizen versus the government, or the establishment. Issues of governmental credibility mounted as the Vietnam conflict continued to escalate, consuming thousands of American lives and billions of American dollars. Apprehensions about government oversight and individual self-determination greatly concerned the public in the wake of the Church Committee and the Rockefeller Commission, as well as the Reagan administration. Conspiracy theorists blanketed the assassination in dense and eccentric stories of espionage and hidden agendas as distrust and discontent in federal officials and institutions continued to mount. Some theories even introduced economic factors as causation for the president's death.⁵ The Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories integrated socially relevant matters into the framework of their narratives, allowing the theories to reach a wider degree of acceptance.

Although many of the theories reflected the over-all uncertainty and paranoia of the era, assassination conspiracy theories also appealed directly to the emotional sensibilities of the American public. The assassination inflicted deep, lasting wounds on the American psyche. Many could not accept the unpredictability and shock of the crime. The official Warren Commission version of the assassination featured a powerful and charismatic world leader being shot in the back by an insignificant loser. In contrast, the presence of a conspiracy allowed the president's death to become more than a random act of violence.⁶

⁵ This theme appears often in theories involving the so-called "military-industrial complex," which conspiracists believe profited from the Vietnam War. A fringe theory links President Kennedy's murder to the Federal Reserve Bank. See, Jim Marrs, *Crossfire: The Plot that Killed Kennedy* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 254-256.

⁶ For more on this, see William Manchester, "No Evidence of a Conspiracy to Kill Kennedy," *The New York Times*, February 5, 1992, A22.

Conspiracy theories rewrote the assassination narrative into an attack on the nation itself. In President Kennedy, conspiracy theorists found a tragic figure cut down in the prime of his life. Utilizing strong feelings of loss and nostalgia, they contributed to popular memorialization of the slain president. In the conspiracy narrative, Kennedy emerged as a mythic and infallible hero, representative of American postwar progress and ideology, targeted by an unseen but powerful cabal of elite individuals intent on authoritarian control and warmongering. By grafting the president's assassination to growing feelings of institutional distrust, the nation became collateral damage to the shooting. Conspiracy theories placed the interests of the country in the same crosshairs as the president under fire. President Kennedy and the American public became unified as victims of the same alleged plot. Conspiracy theories provided a tragic but meaningful emotional link between President Kennedy and the perceived decline of the country he left behind.

An Emerging Culture of Suspicion

Along with popular memorialization, Kennedy assassination theories transformed President Kennedy's murder into a distinct cultural marker that indicated the end of America's postwar success. It stirred an emotional chord in millions of Americans. The assassination, and the conspiracy theories surrounding it, provided the American public with an explanation for contemporary events of the final decades of the twentieth century. Engrained in public memory, the Kennedy assassination became a flashpoint, the fatal beacon that signaled the collapse of a postwar American sense of prosperity and values.

Along with strong public feelings, conspiracy theories transformed President Kennedy's assassination, a seemingly coincidental historical event, into the perceived

starting point for the drastic and seemingly negative changes occurring in the nation from the mid-1960s onward. Important societal factors such as international Cold War anxieties, postwar economic downturn, racial tensions, and generational growing pains before 1963 allowed a powerful new cynicism to form. Intense feelings of nostalgia and loss for the Kennedy era eclipsed earlier hints of national or international tension present before the assassination. Suspicions and doubts raised by Kennedy assassination conspiracy theorists wove their way into the public subconscious as government distrust expanded beyond the 1960s. The complexity of the evidence and erratic versions of events infused the assassination narrative with a cultural malleability that allowed the event to remain in public consciousness from one decade to the next.

Along with events such as the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, the conspiracy theories surrounding the president's murder functioned as a key pillar in establishing widespread public distrust in America's central establishments. With the inflammatory and tumultuous events of the 1960s and 1970s altering American perspectives, a new narrative emerged; one that pitted the people against an oppressive and secretive governing body. The Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories remained popular as they incorporated ideals and figures that were relevant to the times. In the few years following the president's murder, initial speculation focused on a small domestic or international plot. By the mid-1970s, following revelations of government wrongdoing under the Johnson and Nixon administrations, the perpetrators metamorphosed into government intelligence agents. Over the next two decades, the list of conspirators included thousands of individuals working under the invisible control of a shadowy, hidden elite. As belief in Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories remained steady,

public trust in government eroded. By the late 1990s, only an estimated ten percent of individuals significantly trusted the federal government in both domestic and international affairs.⁷ Over three decades, the Kennedy assassination conspiracy industry functioned as a critical bridge between the past and present, providing justification for continued perceptions of suspicion.

Public trust in the federal government was not the only casualty. According to author Robert Alan Goldberg, conspiracy theories, such as those in the Kennedy assassination, demonstrated that Americans had lost faith in journalism, education, and corporate America.⁸ The various explanations for the president's death also acted as a cultural gateway into a new conspiracy-fueled mindset. Author Peter Knight notes that Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories brought "together a whole range of conspiracy theories into one Grand Unified Field Theory of conspiracy."⁹ This unification of conspiracy theories, initially composed under the umbrella of the Kennedy assassination, allowed intense speculation and skepticism to prevail by bringing together different political and social ideologies shaped by the severe cultural distress of the middle twentieth century. The assassination became synonymous with other conspiratorial topics such as the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, and government knowledge of UFO visitations.¹⁰ In the face of

⁷ "Trust in Government," *The Gallup Poll*, May 30-June 1, 1997, accessed on September 27, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/5392/trust-government.aspx>. Answers were provided to the question, "Now I'd like to ask you several questions about our governmental system. First, how much trust and confidence do you have in our federal government in Washington when it comes to handling [International problems/Domestic problems] -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?"

⁸ Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 259.

⁹ Peter Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 96.

¹⁰ James T. Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush V. Gore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 276-277. Patterson links conspiracy theories to perceptions of moral decay prevalent by the 1990s.

objective evidence to the contrary, the dissemination of conspiracy theories continued well into twenty-first century American culture. Persistent conspiracy theories surrounding the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting have their roots in the murky doubts generated by Kennedy assassination conspiracy theorists and the severe government and institutional distrust that allowed the initial theories to flourish.

Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories provided a convoluted but uniquely American twentieth-century interpretation of truth. The blood and tears of three decades of cultural disorder and governmental suspicion continually nurtured the seeds of doubt planted by the early Warren Commission critics. They grew into the complete skepticism of the assassination's evidence and official interpretation as paranoia and cynicism became a commonplace reaction as overall trust continued to wane. Over time, a new narrative formed, one that told more about the people who constructed and accepted it than the event itself. The search for absolute truth became a quest for personal meaning.

The formation of the Kennedy assassination industry from 1963 to 1993 developed as a direct symptom of the continued loss of faith in American institutions. Widespread acceptance of assassination theories grew, not as the result of alleged conspiracy evidence, but as public trust in government eroded. Assassination researchers generated doubt based on ambiguous or circumstantial evidence but never provided an irrefutable "smoking gun" indicating a conspiracy. Instead, Americans entertained the idea of conspiracy based on perceived deterioration of American values and loss of faith in government. Disruptive and polarizing events of the late twentieth century transformed assassination conspiracy theories into seemingly plausible scenarios. As trust continued

to fail, the scope of the theories grew larger and more eccentric. People accepted assassination theories as true not because of definitive evidence generated by the conspiracy theorists but because of the political and cultural environment in which the theories were presented. The theories represented a direct reflection of how Americans perceived their government, their place in society, and their own values.

The construction of conspiracy theories allowed Americans a front row seat in the creation of their own history and legacy. Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories figuratively placed the American public in Dealey Plaza on that fateful day in Dallas. It made them a witness to the terrible forces that shaped their lives. But it also provided them with the apparent opportunity to discover the truth and restore an idealized national vision of prosperity and progress. The power of the truth became liberation from a ruling society they perceived as cloaked in secrecy and insensitivity. The construction of the popular assassination narrative reflected Americans coming to grips with their own messy and unpredictable history, and as a reflection of the emerging culture of anxiety and suspicion that developed after 1963.

The popular narrative of the Kennedy assassination represents a mixture of history and myth. In the screenplay to Oliver Stone's *JFK*, David Ferrie refers to the assassination as "a mystery wrapped in a riddle inside an enigma."¹¹ This description aptly fits the complex and evolving nature of the assassination as it fades into history. The theories altered the assassination narrative as entailing more than the murder of a president. The Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories envisioned late twentieth-century American history as a morality play; an intense battle between the forces of good

¹¹ Oliver Stone and Zachary Skylar, *JFK: The Book of the Film* (New York: Applause Books, 1992), 93.

and evil. The president became an effigy for America's hopes and dreams. Long-trusted institutions were recast into the roles of villains, intent on destroying American values. The general public were tasked with reclaiming truth in the wake of an existential national tragedy. The popular assassination narrative in place by the 1990s ensured immortalization, not only for the slain president but for a perceived highpoint in American history: the peak of postwar trust and optimism.

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