

# 1 JFK: History of the Conspiracy Theories

## 2 I. Overview and Analysis

- ◆ JFK's death began a new era in conspiracy theory:
  - "Broadened the base" of c.t. beyond the anticommunist far right-wing
  - Fears shifted from outside subversion to evil & corruption of the whole system
- ◆ The Aftermath: Clips from *Four Days in November*
- ◆ The Politics of JFK Assassination Investigations
  - Despite Cold War & LHO beliefs, communists rarely blamed for JFK murder, with exception of useful kooks such as Prof. [Reville P. Oliver](#).
  - Political and academic establishment of the mid-60s was heavily committed to the "[liberal consensus](#)" & thus had every reason to suppress conspiracy beliefs.
    - ◆ Establishment fears of the "politics of unreason," the radical right ([John Birch Society](#)), and possibility of an irrational public overreacting to news of a conspiracy.
  - Close relationship between the rise of 1960s radicalism & the rise of JFK c.t.'s.
    - ◆ Left-wing origin of most theories, attraction to argument that LHO was a U.S. spy or the victim of a [frame-up](#), not Commie.
    - ◆ Rise of protest after JFK: The Berkeley "[Free Speech Movement](#)," 1964.
    - ◆ Deep distrust of established institutions pervaded both JFK c.t.'s and 60s radicalism. Example of [Carl Oglesby](#), SDS leader & conspiracy theorist.
    - ◆ Conspiracy fears & paranoia in 60s/70s counterculture & its enemies: "[Paul is Dead](#)" ([wikipedia](#)) [Easy Rider](#), [Texas Chainsaw Massacre](#)
  - The "Sympathy for the Devil" thesis: JFK assassination as a distraction that turned ordinary citizens and radicals alike into ineffectual political paranoids.

## 3 II. How the Theorizing Began

- ◆ The [Manchester thesis](#): Crime and criminal did not balance.
- ◆ Truly, obviously bizarre/mysterious aspects of the case:
  - [Jack Ruby's mob background & police connections](#)
  - Ruby's murder of Oswald, entry & escape
  - Oswald's "patsy" claim, plus failure to record what he said
  - Oswald's strange, contradictory background
    - ◆ Communist in the Marines at sensitive posts
    - ◆ Defection to and undefection from Soviet Union
    - ◆ Communist and anti-communist associations (Russian émigrés)
    - ◆ Spy-like behavior: Post office boxes and aliases
- ◆ Early reactions:
  - Polls showed that most of the public believed in *some* conspiracy from the beginning, at least that Oswald did not act alone.
  - Left was most influential in suspecting conspiracies, blamed the Right
    - ◆ Site of shooting in Dallas, a hotbed of right-wing activity, strongly suggested a right-wing plot.
    - ◆ Left-wing lawyer Mark Lane appointed himself Oswald's defense attorney, raised problems with evidence immediately after the assassination (Dec. 1963)
  - First fully developed c.t.s came from European Left, who saw Dallas as a violent coup d'état such as commonly happened in world history
    - ◆ First book: Joachim Joesten's *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?*
    - ◆ Bertrand Russell and the "Who Killed Kennedy Committee?": Dreyfus affair comparison.
    - ◆ Left split over JFK conspiracy theories: I.F. Stone attacks "demonology."
    - ◆ Soviets spread JFK c.t.'s through their official media
  - Lone gunman theories as defense of "American exceptionalism": US officials wanted to show that true political violence *still* could not happen here, that U.S. had its own tradition of assassination by deranged, paranoid loners.

## 4 III. The Warren Commission

- ◆ Rushed, sloppy investigation caused more problems than it solved.
- ◆ Warren Commission's paternalism, emphasis on calming fears, quashing rumors & protecting "our institutions."
  - Pressures due to 1964 election
  - [Members](#): Chief Justice Earl Warren, House leaders Hale Boggs & G. Ford, Senators R. Russell & J.S. Cooper, Chase Manhattan Pres. John McCloy, plus Allen Dulles (CIA director fired by JFK).
- ◆ Problems with the investigation:
  - Non-cooperation of the CIA & FBI. Warren's failure to press for more cooperation.
  - Members' failure to attend meetings and generally political approach.
  - Set up as prosecution of Oswald, but Oswald was allowed no representation.
  - W.C. adopted "lone gunman" & "single bullet" theories despite contradictions in the evidence. Leads were not followed if they led to a possible c.t.
- ◆ 1964: Mainstream media and public largely accepted the lone gunman theory, at first. Warren Commission seemed to be a success.
  - *Warren Report* (intro) & non-c.t. JFK books were among 1964 bestsellers.
  - Wide, quick public acceptance of the liberal martyr view of JFK.
  - Playing on idea of Kennedy as liberal martyr, President Johnson got major civil rights legislation passed & crushed Goldwater in the election.

## 5 IV. The Rise of the Buffs and the Fall of the Lone Gunman

- ◆ The collapse of faith in the Warren Commission's work
  - Tracked with the rise of political turmoil in 60s: urban race riots, antiwar protests, etc. As liberal consensus broke up, so did belief in the lone gunman theory.
  - Early emergence of independent critics & lay researchers, or "buffs": Mark Lane (*Rush to Judgment*—1966 bestseller), Sylvia Meagher, Harold Weisberg, Josiah Thompson, David Lifton, & others. Buff investigations (and c.t. in general) as "people's scholarship."
  - Doubts about Warren Commission raised by mainstream media (*Life*) by 1966, encouraged by Edward Jay Epstein's *Inquest*, a Cornell MA thesis.
- ◆ The Rise of the Zapruder Film
  - [Jim Garrison's prosecution of businessman Clay Shaw](#), 1967-69: failed, homophobic, corrupt & baseless, but legitimated buffs & caused wide distribution of Abraham Zapruder's home movie of the assassination. The Perry Russo problem.
  - Film became centerpiece of a traveling roadshow that spread views of conspiracy buffs to local audiences, especially at colleges.

- Zapruder film lent great power to "common sense" arguments of buffs, especially for a second shooter in front of JFK on the Grassy Knoll.
  - ◊ One reason: apparent snap of head back and to the left.
  - ◊ Answered by the "jet effect."
- Most "popular" conspirators at this time were typical left-wing/Cold War villains, but researchers focused on technical investigations rather than "who" or "why."
- ◆ Factors that allowed JFK c.t.s to go mainstream: Fear, shock, loss of faith in American society.
  - Generally distrustful spirit of times combined with rising crime, social change, political turmoil:
    - ◊ Rapid escalation of Vietnam War despite promises & protests, growing "credibility gap" over how truthfully public & Congress were informed about the war.
      - "Operation Chaos": Johnson administration asked CIA to investigate possibility that anti-war movement was a foreign-controlled conspiracy. Answer was no.

## 6 V. The Paranoid

### Legacy of 1968

- ◆ Political Turmoil
  - MLK & RFK assassinations, April & June 1968, both at times and under circumstances that suggested more right-wing plots.
    - ◊ Martin Luther King was killed as he was turning to Poor People's Campaign, economic issues.
    - ◊ Robert Kennedy was murdered on the day he won the California primary, seemingly enroute to sure victory in November.
      - RFK had become much more liberal, jumped in race after anti-war candidate Eugene McCarthy had forced out President Johnson.
    - ◊ Left-leaning CTs about 68 assassinations arose in response to more "lone gunman" explanations, but was undermined by:
      - Lack of real mystery surrounding accused assassins James Earl Ray (another patsy) or Sirhan Sirhan (brainwashed?).
      - Violence against conservative targets in 1970s (Wallace, Ford).
    - ◊ Vice President Hubert Humphrey was nominated by Democrats as demonstrators and police rioted, followed by mutual conspiracy theories & conspiracy trial of the "Chicago 7."
    - ◊ Turmoil led to election of our most paranoid politician, Richard Nixon.
  - ◆ Growth of paranoid left-wing terrorism after 1968 – Weather Underground, Symbionese Liberation Army & the Patty Hearst kidnapping, skyjackings
    - Leftist terrorism actually much less of a problem here than in Europe: Munich, Aldo Moro case, Provisional IRA

## 7 VI. Conspiracy A Go-Go: The 1970s

- ◆ The Post-Watergate Interregnum, 1974-78
  - 1974 elections as high point of liberal Democratic political power in recent history, artificial break from ongoing conservative trend.
  - 1975, "The Year of Intelligence": CIA becomes major political issue as Church Committee and press exposed CIA as "rogue elephant on a rampage": domestic surveillance (incl. wiretaps & mail opening), foreign coups (Chile) & assassination attempts, drug experiments.
    - ◊ Secrets first came out because of CIA & FBI involvement in Watergate, internal "Family Jewels" report arising from post-Helms shakeup.
    - ◊ Led to closer oversight of, & sharp, but often ineffective, restrictions on covert intelligence activities.
    - ◊ Rogue CIA idea led to CTs such as Christic Institute's "Secret Team."
  - National broadcast of the Zapruder film in 1975 by Geraldo Rivera.
  - House Select Committee on Assassinations (1978) – a new, conspiracy-minded investigation found little that was new.
    - ◊ At last minute, endorsed conspiracy in general, based on since-discredited audio evidence of a 4th shot.
    - ◊ Other evidence mostly supported W.C. conclusions, but the committee's work led to wide acceptance of a JFK conspiracy.
  - ◆ The Conservative 80s: Reagan elected in 1980
    - Emergence of the Mafia theory, growing from work of G. Robert Blakey, chief counsel of the House Select Committee
      - ◊ Made Kennedys complicit in own death, took in anti-JFK CTs like Marilyn
      - ◊ Took left-wing politics out of JFK CTs, allowed for . . .
    - New conservative-leaning CTs: "stab in the back" view of Vietnam, POWs & MIAs, renewal of Cold War, Watergate revisionism

## 8 VII. The Oliver Stone Era

- ◆ Oliver Stone's hit film *JFK* (1991): used some of the dumbest c.t.s.; mixed fact & fiction; brought Vietnam, military-industrial complex motive to the fore.
  - Huge controversy over the film led to creation of the Assassination Records Review Board and the release of most remained assassination-related records, 1992-98. Not much there.
  - Media increasingly dismissed political conspiracy theories after the controversy over Stone's *JFK*.
- ◆ Oliver's Fallacies -- a sampling
  - A conspiracy too immense, the back-and-to-the left head snap, Smoke on the Grassy Knoll
  - The "Magic Bullet" (CE 399)
  - Too-perfect evidence trail (photos, mail-order rifle, sightings)
  - Oswald the Multiple Man
    - ◊ Logical flaws & factual errors in the Oswald impersonator scenario: confuses motives; Oswald could not drive; gun had a site, etc.
  - CT as Science Fiction
    - ◊ They Stole Kennedy's Brain: David Lifton's "body alteration" theory
    - ◊ Umbrella Man and the Darts of Death
- ◆ Final thoughts: The return of American exceptionalism and the depoliticization of the JFK narrative.

## 18 Richard M. Nixon,

### Anticommunist Politician

- ◆ Lower-middle-class WASP, grew up in Southern California. Chip on shoulder.
- ◆ One of many WWII vets elected to Congress in 1946. Red-baited a respected liberal.
- ◆ Served on HUAAC & made his name exposing ex-diplomat Alger Hiss as a Communist spy.
- ◆ Elected to Senate in 1950 by red-baiting another liberal, "pink lady" Helen Douglas.
- ◆ Status as leading anti-commie got him VP slot under Eisenhower.
- ◆ Paranoid about press, who disliked "Tricky Dick."
- ◆ Believed he was cheated out of 1960 election by Democratic machines. Also, mob & CIA.
- ◆ Embarrassed when he ran for California governor & lost in 1962. Blamed the media.
- ◆ Repackaged for 1968 as "New Nixon" who would stop war, end 60s turmoil, bring "law & order."
  - Unprecedented, then-sophisticated ad campaign played on late 60s paranoia about crime, race (civil rights/black power), hippies, student radicalism.
  - Nixon won as racist candidate Wallace took South away from Democrats.

19  **Richard M. Nixon,**

**Paranoid President**

- ◆ Did not end Vietnam War, ↓ US troops, ↑ bombing, secretly invaded Cambodia.
  - Huge wave of Cambodia protests in 1970. Four students killed by National Guard at Kent State.
- ◆ Upset by continued antiwar protests & by leaking of "Pentagon Papers" to *NY Times* in 1971.
  - Papers showed how government had kept doubts & negative info on Vietnam from public for years.
- ◆ The Watergate scandal
  - Nixon took paranoid security measures, including taping meetings & the creation of a White House counterintelligence operation, the Plumbers.
  - Wiretaps, burglaries, disinformation, sabotage, IRS pressure used against Nixon enemies.
  - Same activities used during 1972 campaign, including break-in at Democratic HQ in Watergate bldg, despite Nixon's landslide win.
  - Scandal erupted & bribes used to silence witnesses, FBI investigation shut down. Nixon then stonewalled investigators, especially on issue of tapes.
    - ✦ Origin of the "liberal media" c.t.: *Washington Post* stories of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.
    - ✦ Special Prosecutor was appointed but Nixon fired him! Made Independent Counsel Act seem necessary.
  - Nixon resigned after House Judiciary Committee voted to impeach. Then pardoned by his ex-VP Gerald Ford.
- ◆ Atmosphere of disgust (tapes), pessimism & distrust pervaded culture, leading to heyday of conspiracy films, investigations, even comic books.

21  **But Maybe Nixon was Framed . . .**

- ◆ 1980s brought various new theories that tried to depict Nixon as the *victim* of Watergate:
  - Left: set-up by CIA in retaliation for Nixon's reorganization, firing of longtime leaders.
  - Pro-Nixon: Burglary was organized by Nixon aides John Dean and Alexander Haig to retrieve evidence on a prostitution ring involving Dean's wife and/or a military operation spying on Nixon that Haig was involved in.
    - ✦ Military supposedly did not like Nixon's new soft-on-communism foreign policy.
  - Dean and Haig then gave information blaming Nixon to *Wash. Post* (Deep Throat) & investigators.
    - ✦ *Post's* Bob Woodward, former intelligence officer, may have been in on it!
- ◆ Facts supporting these ideas:
  - CIA background of several Watergate burglars & Plumbers (Hunt, McCord, Martinez).
  - Actual existence of military efforts to spy on Nixon White House.
- ◆ My view: Nixon was guilty but also surrounded by other sneaky, paranoid people & institutions.