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DANGEROUS, FANATICAL, FANTASISTS: CONSPIRACY AND GOVERNMENT IN THE ASSASSINATION OF JOHN F. KENNEDY

Introduction

On November 24, 1963, two days after John F. Kennedy was gunned down in Dallas, Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield stood in the rotunda of the United States Capitol and eulogized the late president. “He gave that we might give ourselves,” said Mansfield. “That we might give to one another until there would be no room, no room at all, for the bigotry, the hatred, the prejudice, and the arrogance which converged in that moment of horror to strike him down.”¹ Mansfield’s eulogy was both sweepingly poetic and remarkably brief. It mirrored the cinematic and sudden nature of the assassination itself: the unseen gunshot, the beautiful wife splattered with her husband’s blood, the three-year-old boy, saluting with solemn bravery, his father’s coffin as it passed.

¹ Mike Mansfield, Earl Warren, and John W. McCormack. *John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Eulogies to the Late President Delivered in the Rotunda of the United States Capitol, November 24, 1963* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1963).

If Mansfield's eulogy was romantic, the one that followed, delivered by Chief Justice of the United States Earl Warren, was stark. "We are saddened," said Warren simply. "We are stunned. We are perplexed."²

This last word, "perplexed," may seem benign in contrast to the horror and shock that washed over the United States in the waning days of '63. But in fact, this state of perplexedness was persistent and powerful, reaching even the new president, Lyndon B. Johnson, who appointed Warren to lead a commission to investigate Kennedy's killing. In 1964, the Warren Commission reported their simple conclusion: the President was killed by a shot to the back of the head, fired by one Lee Harvey Oswald. The final report of the Commission concluded that "Oswald acted alone. Therefore, to determine the motives for the assassination of President Kennedy, one must look to the assassin himself."³ (Unfortunately, Oswald was shot in the aftermath of the assassination, making "looking to the assassin himself" essentially impossible.)

The American public has never really been in accordance with the findings of the Warren Commission. Gallup polls taken between 1963 and 2013 have consistently shown a belief among the majority⁴ of Americans that some kind of conspiracy was at work in the killing of John F. Kennedy.⁵ The nature of these conspiracy theories is not uniform--some believe Kennedy was killed by the CIA or the Cuban government, the FBI or the Klu Klux Klan.⁶ Over the past fifty-six years, the government has engaged with Kennedy conspiracy theorists--whether by defending against them, actively investigating them, or supporting them. The aftermath of the Kennedy assassination has proven that conspiracy theories can drive action in Congress and United States Intelligence Communities; the vivid imaginations of regular citizens and the powerful institutions we trust to

² Ibid.

³ Warren Commission, *Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*, (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1964), 22.

⁴ In December 1966, exactly half of Americans interviewed by the poll believed in a conspiracy.

⁵ Art Swift, "Majority in U.S. Still Believe JFK Killed in a Conspiracy," *Gallup*, November 15, 2013.

⁶ Ibid.

govern us do not always inhabit separate worlds--a fact which should both reassure and frighten us. Of course, it is one of the principal pillars of democracy that a government and its people should interact and exchange ideas. But what does a government do when those ideas are fanatical and potentially dangerous, as is often the case with conspiracy theories?

Definitions and Literature Review

Academic literature typically outlines three factors which contribute to belief in conspiracy theories: epistemological (a need to understand something that “doesn’t make sense”), existential (a need to control a seemingly uncontrollable situation), and social (a need to maintain “a positive image of the self and the group.”)⁷ The Kennedy conspiracy theories I will discuss in this paper are primarily driven by epistemological factors--the idea that somehow, somewhere, something “doesn’t fit.” For example, much of the pushback against the Warren Report stemmed from the idea of the “magic bullet.” The Warren Report suggests that a single bullet hit Kennedy in the back of the neck, exited through his throat, struck Texas Governor Conally (who was sitting in front of Kennedy) in the back, travelled through his back and chest, and exited below his nipple, then passing through his wrist and thigh.⁸ To early conspiracy theorists such as Mark Lane and James Garrison, both of whom I will discuss in the forthcoming section of this paper, the “magic bullet” didn’t stand to reason epistemologically.

It is important to note that many scholars believe that the academic research surrounding conspiracy theories consistently runs into inherent problems. For example, scholar M.R.X. Dentith argues that while “we often rely upon what experts tell us when it comes to assessing whether particular conspiracy theories ought to be believed,” there is no way to determine who is actually an

⁷ Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichoska. “The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26, no. 6 (December 2017): 538-542.

⁸ Warren Commission, *Report*, 19.

“expert” in regards to conspiracy theories.⁹ Philosopher Katherine Hawley points out that even scrutinizing why people believe conspiracy theories presupposes that belief in said theories is irrational.¹⁰ With scholars looking at conspiracy theories from historical, political, psychological, and philosophical perspectives, the field remains complex and changing. Therefore, how we study--and perhaps even define--conspiracy theories is certain to shift in the coming years. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will borrow from psychologist Karen M. Douglas and define conspiracy theories as theories which “explain important events as secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups.”¹¹ In science, a theory is a generally accepted way of explaining the world--for example, the theory of evolution is taken by most scholars as fact. By contrast, conspiracy theories are not necessarily true or even based on rational thought. However, the government’s response to conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy is significant. It is one example of how the government and the people interact in times of crisis, and how that interaction may affect official proceedings.

Early Kennedy Conspiracy Theories and Intelligence Community Pushback

In the sixties, when conspiracy theorists began to question the findings of the Warren Report, the CIA and the FBI took action to protect themselves against what they saw as a threat. Among early Kennedy conspiracy theorists was Mark Lane, a lawyer who had acted as legal counsel to Mrs. Lee Harvey Oswald. In 1966, Lane published *Rush to Judgement*, a book in which he questions the findings of the Warren Commission. Lane’s book did not go unnoticed. Certainly, it was a popular success, spending more than seven months at the top of the New York Times bestseller list. The CIA also

⁹ M.R.X Dentith. “Expertise and Conspiracy Theories.” *Social Epistemology* 32, no. 3 (2018): 196-208.

¹⁰ Katherine Hawley. “Conspiracy theories, impostor syndrome, and distrust.” *Philosophical Studies* 176, no. 4 (April 2019): 969-980.

¹¹ Douglas, Sutton, and Cichoska, “Psychology of Conspiracy Theories.”

took note. In 1967, a year after the book's publication, the Agency circulated a memo to heads of station, directing them on how to respond to criticism of the report, noting particularly that, "various writers have now had time to scan the Commission's published report and documents for new pretexts of questioning, and there has been a new wave of books and articles criticizing the Commission's findings."¹² The CIA took this questioning very seriously, and well they should have--given that conspiracy theorists of the time implicated the CIA in their writings. "Conspiracy theories have frequently thrown suspicion on our organization," says the memo, "for example by falsely alleging that Lee Harvey Oswald worked for us."¹³ The memo went on to state, "The aim of this dispatch is to provide material for countering and discrediting the claims of conspiracy theorists, so as to inhibit the circulation of such claims in other countries."¹⁴ The CIA believed that conspiracy theorists threatened the United States on an international stage, claiming that, "This trend of opinion is a matter of concern to the U.S. government, including our organization...Innuendo of such seriousness affects not only the individual concerned, but also the whole reputation of the American government."¹⁵ The mere existence of this memo, not to mention the strength of language used by the Agency, goes to show that Kennedy conspiracy theories were not shouts in the dark, but echoed in the highest reaches of intelligence offices.

On the heels of the Mark Lane arose another, perhaps more official-seeming theorist. Jim Garrison was a six-foot-six Louisiana District Attorney representing New Orleans. Garrison, like many of his fellow Americans, initially believed the findings of the Warren Commission. But after actually reading the Commission's report, he changed his mind. In 1967, Garrison told Eric Norden of *Playboy Magazine* that "it's impossible for anyone possessed of reasonable objectivity and a fair

¹² Chief, CA Staff to Chief, Certain Stations and Bases, CIA Memorandum: "Countering Criticism of the Warren Report," January 4, 1967, Mary Ferrell Foundation and US National Archives, 1.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

degree of intelligence to read those 26 volumes and not reach the conclusion that Warren Commission was wrong in every one of its major conclusions pertaining to the assassination.”¹⁶ Mark Lane certainly influenced Garrison--in his interview with *Playboy*, Garrison cites Lane early, saying, “As Mark Lane says, “The only way you can believe the *Report* is not to have read it.”¹⁷

Garrison was fairly certain he knew what had really happened, and was all the more horrified that the assassination plot had “hatched” right under his nose. One key suspect was David Ferrie, a visitor to New Orleans who had left the city for Dallas just before the assassination, claiming that he wanted to go “ice skating” and “duck hunting” in Texas. Garrison’s elaborate theory had Ferrie and others acting in what he called a “motley group of political adventurers,” whose anti-communist, anti-peace convictions had led them to kill the President.¹⁸

In Garrison’s world, two separate groups were working together under the eye of the CIA to kill Kennedy. The two groups were fascist-sympathizing Americans, who Garrison called “Minutemen” and Cuban exiles. According to Garrison, the CIA was in the process of training these two groups to attempt a second invasion of Cuba after the Bay of Pigs disaster. “But then,” said Garrison to *Playboy*, “Kennedy, who had signed a secret agreement with [Premier of Soviet Union] Krushchev after the Missile Crisis pledging not to invade Cuba if Russia would soft-pedal Castro’s subversive activities in the Americas, began to crackdown on CIA operations against Cuba.”¹⁹ Garrison believed that one of the masterminds behind the assassination was a New Orleans businessman named Clay Shaw, who he actually prosecuted in a well-publicized trial.

Yet again, the CIA took note. In an internal memo circulated by the CIA in April 1967, the Agency claimed that Garrison’s theory was “jerry-built and flimsy.” Nonetheless, they could not

¹⁶ Eric Norden, “Playboy Interview: Jim Garrison,” *Playboy*, October, 1967, 74.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 74.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 159.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 156.

dismiss it out of hand, saying, “The weakness of the ‘case’ will not effectively lessen the damage to the CIA if, as seems probable, he charges the Agency involvement with the ‘plotters.’”²⁰ In fact, Garrison did accuse several people of working for the CIA, causing the Agency to release a flurry of memos. One declassified CIA document reads, “Since the Garrison investigation was first publicized in February 1967, we have kept a book on all persons in the case.”²¹ A second document states that while “earlier memoranda...[had] shown Garrison’s charges to be false, “it [was] clearly important, nevertheless, to discern as much as possible of the nature of the case that he [would] try to make against Clay Shaw (and CIA) when Shaw [came] to trial.”²² Documents like these memos and the earlier memo countering criticism of the Warren Report prove that while the CIA may not have had reason to believe theories like Garrison’s, it still saw them as “clearly important” and potentially irreparably damaging.

The House Select Committee on Assassinations and *JFK*

While Lane and Garrison may have been two of the more prominent early conspiracy theorists of the Kennedy Assassination, they certainly weren’t the only ones. As time passed and more information came to light, more and more Americans became, as Warren might have said, “perplexed.” In fact, Gallup polls show belief in a Kennedy conspiracy spiking from 50 to 81% between 1966 and 1976, when living in American life was marred with violence, chaos, and loss. Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in April of 1968; Kennedy’s brother, Robert Francis Kennedy was killed two months later; and all the while, the Vietnam war raged and seethed.

²⁰ CIA Memorandum: “Garrison and the Kennedy Assassination,” April 26, 1967, Mary Ferrell Foundation and US National Archives and Record Administration, 1.

²¹ CIA Memorandum: “Garrison and the Kennedy Assassination,” September 7, 1967, Mary Ferrell Foundation and US National Archives and Record Administration, 1.

²² CIA Memorandum: “Garrison and the Kennedy Assassination,” August 17, 1967, Mary Ferrell Foundation and US National Archives and Record Administration, 6.

During this turbulent time, Congress actually investigated conspiracy theorists in an official capacity- and perhaps more remarkably, became conspiracy theorists themselves.

One major factor which contributed to the surge in conspiracy-believers was the establishment of the Church Committee in 1975. The Church Committee, formed in the murky wake of Nixon's watergate scandal, had revealed that both the CIA and the FBI had withheld information from the Warren Commission. Impressive, elaborate, somewhat hare-brained truths came to light about the Central Intelligence Agency and its covert actions. If the CIA had at one point, considered spreading toxic fungus in Fidel Castro's diving suit, or poisoning his cigars, did that mean that they, too, had killed Kennedy?²³

In 1976, Congress took official action and established the House Select Committee on Assassinations to re-open investigations into the killings of President Kennedy and Dr. King. This committee was a direct response to the revelations of the Church Commission. States the introduction of the Committee's report:

Substantial impetus for the creation of a select committee to investigate these assassinations was derived from revelations in the report of the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities [Church Commission]... The Senate select committee reported that the Central Intelligence Agency had withheld from the Warren Commission, during its investigation of the assassination of President Kennedy, information about plots by the Government of the United States against Fidel Castro of Cuba; and that the Federal Bureau of Investigation had conducted a Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) against Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.²⁴

The House Select Committee on Assassinations directly investigated the claims of conspiracy theorists and even brought them in to testify. The committee "sought to employ scientific analysis to explain some conspiracy theories about the assassination."²⁵ The committee were particularly interested in the

²³ Church Committee, *Report of the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities*, (Washington, DC: 1976), 71-72.

²⁴ House Select Committee, *Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations*, (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, March 29, 1979), 9.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 91.

case of Joseph Milteer, “a militant conservative who had been secretly recorded on tape by a police informant two weeks prior to the assassination as he described a plan to assassinate the president.” As the committee noted, “some critics” had thought they identified Milteer in photographs taken in Dallas the day of the assassination, but the committee, through the use of anthropologists, determined that Milteer was not the man who appeared in the photographs.²⁶

While the House select committee determined through “scientific analysis” that none of the theories they investigated could possibly have been true, they nonetheless reached a remarkable conclusion. The committee reported that they believed, “on the basis of evidence available to it, that President John F. Kennedy was probably assassinated as the result of a conspiracy.”²⁷ The committee members reached this conclusion after analyzing a radio transmission in which they believed it possible to hear “four or more shots.”²⁸ Since Oswald only fired three, the existence of this tape proved, in the committee’s minds, that there was a second gunman and thus, a conspiracy. However, “the committee was unable to identify the other gunmen or the extent of the conspiracy.”²⁹ In this way, the members of the House select committee themselves became Kennedy assassination conspiracy theorists.

Doubt only grew among the public. Writes historian M. Steven Gillon,

By the 1980s, polls showed that large majorities of Americans now believed their own government was involved in the assassination of President Kennedy. A *Newsweek* poll taken on the 20th anniversary of the assassination [1983] showed that 74 percent of Americans believed that ‘others were involved,’ while only 11 percent thought Oswald acted alone.³⁰

One of the skeptical Americans was filmmaker Oliver Stone. Stone directed *JFK*, which starred Kevin Costner and premiered in 1991. The movie grossed \$195 million in the box office and won two

²⁶ Ibid, 91.

²⁷ Ibid, 95.

²⁸ John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. “November 22, 1963: Death of the President.” [jfklibrary.org. https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/november-22-1963-death-of-the-president](https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/november-22-1963-death-of-the-president) (accessed August 5, 2019).

²⁹ House Select Committee, *Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations*, 95.

³⁰ Steven M. Gillon, “Why the Public Stopped Believing the Government about JFK’s Murder,” *History.com*, October 30, 2017.

Academy awards. *JFK* is a fictionalized retelling of Jim Garrison's quest to uncover conspiracy. (Garrison not only advised Stone, but also played Earl Warren in the film. Furthermore, Time Warner released a paperback version Garrison's book *On the Trail of Assassins*, which, according to *The New York Times*, quickly became a bestseller.)³¹

Stone paints Garrison as a put-upon patriot, doggedly chasing truth all over the nation. It's easy to like the film version of Garrison. In fact, Costner's Garrison is strikingly reminiscent of Gregory Peck's Atticus Finch in the 1962 adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Like the benevolent Finch, Garrison is portrayed as a well-dressed, bi-spectacled, benignly handsome Southern lawyer whose rousing courtroom speeches capture the minds and hearts of even those who most vehemently opposed him. Moreover, Garrison is a family man, wrapping his arms--just as Atticus Finch does--around his children on his porch swing. When his son expresses fear of being killed like Kennedy, Garrison reassures him, "There's nothing wrong with feeling scared, Jasper. Telling the truth can be a scary thing sometimes. It scared President Kennedy and he was a brave man." This is how Stone wants the audience to see Garrison: one brave man defending another, even in death.

JFK attacks the CIA without apology, blaming the Agency for orchestrating a brutal "public execution" of the president. More than that, the CIA is a twisted organization driving the nation at an alarming pace towards fascism. When one of Garrison's associates pushes back on his theory, Costner as Garrison exclaims, with Southern passion, "Y'all gotta start thinking on a different level, like the CIA!"³²

The film puts forth that Kennedy was killed because he wanted to withdraw from Vietnam. (Whether or not Kennedy actually would have withdrawn from Vietnam is debated--two months

³¹ Bruce Lambert, "Jim Garrison, 70, Theorist on Kennedy Death, Dies," *The New York Times print archive*, October 22, 1992.

³² *JFK*. Film. Directed by Oliver Stone. Los Angeles: Warner Bros, 1991.

before he died, the president came down firmly against withdrawal.)³³ But Stone hints that had Kennedy lived, the war would not have continued. Thusly, the CIA and the American government are indicted by the film not only in the killing of Kennedy, but in the “2 million Asian lives lost” and the “58,000 American lives lost,” information that rolls across the screen just before the credits.³⁴ Following these grim statistics is a paragraph which points out that even though the House select committee found evidence of “probable conspiracy,” the government has “done nothing.”³⁵

It didn't take long for that to change.

A little less than a year after the release of *JFK*, Congress passed the John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act, which “mandated that all assassination-related material be housed in a single collection in the National Archives and Records Administration.”³⁶ The act also established the Assassination Records Review Board. The board took six years to review the assassination records, before transferring them to the National Archives where they are now (almost entirely) available for public viewing. The relationship between the act and the Oliver Stone film is clear. In the board's final report in 1998, the executive summary states, “Frustrated by the lack of action and disturbed by the conclusions of Oliver Stone's *JFK*, Congress passed *The President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992*...mandating the gathering and opening of all records concerned with the death of the President.”³⁷ Stone himself admitted to the *New York Times* that *JFK* was “not a true story,” and yet this fictional film had an enormous impact on the declassification and public release of thousands of documents.

³³ John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. “Vietnam.” [jfklibrary.org](https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/vietnam). <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/vietnam> (accessed August 5, 2019).

³⁴ *JFK*. Film.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ The National Archives. “The President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection.” [Archives.gov](https://www.archives.gov/research/jfk). <https://www.archives.gov/research/jfk> (accessed August 5, 2019).

³⁷ Henry F. Graff, Kermit L. Hall, William L. Hall, William L. Joyce, and Anna Kasten Nelson, John R. Turnheim, *Final Report of the Assassination Records Review Board*, (Washington, DC: September 30, 1998), xxiii.

Conclusion

The conclusions of the House Select Committee have since been negated by “acoustics experts” who listened to the previously-earth-shattering transmission tape and found it “worthless.”³⁸ As far as anyone can tell, Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. There was no conspiracy in Dallas that day. The death of President Kennedy, tragic though it may be, was the result of a single madman and his untraceable anger. While these lone shooters and the worlds they destroy may have seemed inconceivable in 1963, they have now become an almost daily part of American life. It’s not so difficult to believe, now, that John F. Kennedy’s death was as senseless as it was sudden.

And yet, this violent moment has captured imaginations for more than half a century. In some cases, those imaginations touched the most powerful institutions in the country. Why does it matter that fiction and conspiracy can influence government and intelligence action? The impact of conspiracy theories on government proceedings in the wake of the Kennedy assassination proves that the powerful organizations we trust to protect and guide us are neither impenetrable by fiction nor impervious to fantasy. This was not only the case in 1963. As Professor Alexandra Andorfer writes,

Falsity in politics is hardly a new problem...However, the ease of disseminating information on the internet coupled with the increasingly polarized political climate has led to fake news-- a phenomenon that politicians and pundits argue had great influence on the November 2016 election in the United States and continues to manipulate the American public today.³⁹

The fact that completely false information might have the ability to change something as all-important as the election of the President of the United States is terrifying. And yet, it is also goes to show that the voices of American citizens, whether truthful or not, can and are heard behind the marble pillars of our most powerful institutions. When Kennedy famously said, “Ask not what your country can do

³⁸ John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. “November 22, 1963: Death of the President.” Jfklibrary.org. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/november-22-1963-death-of-the-president> (accessed August 5, 2019).

³⁹ Alexandra Andorfer. "Spreading Like Wildfire: Solutions for Abating the Fake News Problem on Social Media Via Technology Controls and Government Regulation." *The Hastings Law Journal* 69, no 5 (June 1, 2018): 1409.

for you, but you can do for your country,” he was encouraging citizen action, calling for citizens to raise their voices. Conspiracy theorists like Jim Garrison, Mark Lane, and Oliver Stone likely saw themselves as great patriots. They were serving their country by chasing what they saw as truth. That their theories echoed in Washington is a testament to the very nature of democracy.

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NOTE: I have confirmed that all cited materials from the Mary Ferrell Foundation accurately correspond to documents within the National Archives and Record Administration.

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