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The Dealey Plaza Irregulars: The JFK Assassination and the Collapse of Trust in the 1960s

IN FEBRUARY 1964, three months after the assassination that shattered her world, Shirley Martin packed her four children and her dog into her car and drove seven hours southwest to Dallas. With a recorder concealed in her armpit and her kids in tow, she tracked down the people she was sure could help her learn the truth. On this and several subsequent trips, she interviewed more than fifty people who had information about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, including the priest who gave him the last rites, the woman who shared her house with the accused assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, and his family, and the furniture salesman who stood close to the limousine when the fatal shot hit. Mrs. Martin's husband used a stopwatch to check the FBI's time frame for Oswald's alleged movements.[1] Before the assassination, Shirley Martin had been a housewife from Hominy, Oklahoma. But now she had a calling: she was going to discover who had killed the president.

Martin was not alone. Maggie Field, a Beverly Hills housewife, filled her spacious home with scrapbooks, file boxes, and seventy-five charts detailing the names and locations of witnesses and other known facts of the assassination.[2] A bookkeeper from Los Angeles, Lillian Castellano, sent for a map of the Dallas sewer system to see if another assassin might have hidden in a storm drain.[3] Sylvia Meagher, an analyst for the World Health

Organization in New York, spent six months making an annotated index to the official government report on the assassination, which she termed a "sleazy and insulting fantasy."[4]

These skeptics shared a common conviction: they were certain that their government was lying to them. At a time when 76 percent of the public trusted the government to "do what is right most of the time," these Americans believed that their government was working to cover up the truth—and that this cover-up could have tragic consequences.[5] "There are forces in this country who have gotten away with this thing, and will strike again," said Maggie Field. "And not any one of us is safe."[6]

These researchers of the Kennedy assassination not only believed that government officials had conspired, lied, and covered up aspects of the murder; they also believed that they could expose this conspiracy *on their own*. They could reenact key moments in the drama to check the official story; they could interview eyewitnesses and "earwitnesses" to determine the location of a second (or third, or fourth, or fifth) shooter. They developed a nationwide, grassroots network to pool their knowledge and prove that ordinary citizens could penetrate the national security state's culture of secrecy. "We are not alone," wrote Castellano to another researcher. "There are thousands of little people like you and I—all not satisfied—all wanting the truth."[7]

Unlike the anticommunist conspiracy theorists of the 1950s, the Kennedy researchers had no alliances with wealthy businessmen or government agencies. Indeed, they found themselves attacked by powerful interests. Yet without patrons or publishing contracts, they were determined to find the source of what one researcher called "this evil set loose on the world by the assassination of our president."[8] They formed local study groups, spent hours on the phone with each other, wrote letters of protest to the FBI, combed through the National Archives, and filled their garages with witness location charts and photography labs.

Over the years, they would convert millions to their cause. They had the virtues of dedication, diligence, and almost messianic belief in the righteousness of their cause. They also had the advantage of being partly right.

IT WAS NOT UNREASONABLE for ordinary Americans to believe conspiracy theories about the John Kennedy assassination, because, at the beginning, even the highest officials of the U.S. government considered them. Some

of the most powerful men in the country feared the worst. "What raced through *my* mind," the new president, Lyndon Johnson, later said, "was that, if they had shot our president, driving down there, who would they shoot next? And what was going on in Washington? And when would the missiles be comin'? And *I* thought it was a *conspiracy*, and I raised that question. And nearly everybody that was *with* me raised it."[9] Richard Helms, chief of covert operations for the Central Intelligence Agency, also suspected a communist conspiracy. "It worried the hell out of everybody," Helms said later. "Was this a plot? Who was pulling the strings? And what was to come next?"[10] Attorney General Robert Kennedy, the president's brother, feared a different, home-grown conspiracy. He suspected that anti-Castro Cubans allied with the CIA might have taken revenge on Kennedy for failing to provide enough U.S. support at the Bay of Pigs. He confronted John McCone, the director of the CIA, and demanded to know if the agency had killed Kennedy.[11] McCone denied it.

These public officials suspected conspiracy because they had access to secret information: they knew that the Kennedy administration had conducted real conspiracies that might have provoked what happened in Dallas. In particular, they wondered about the role of the CIA's plots against Fidel Castro. The Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations had supervised at least eight attempts on Castro's life, using anti-Castro Cubans and mafia hit men as their tools. In fact, at the same moment that the Dealey Plaza assassin squinted through his rifle sight, a CIA officer was giving a poison-filled pen to a Cuban dissident in Paris, one of the agency's many plots to assassinate Castro.[12] The Castro plots raised the possibility that anti-Castro Cubans, mobsters, or Castro himself might have ordered the assassination.

One man, however, was absolutely certain that he knew what had happened, and it did not involve a conspiracy. J. Edgar Hoover made the first call to Robert Kennedy to tell him that his brother had been shot, with rather less excitement than "if he were reporting the fact that he found a Communist on the faculty of Howard University," Kennedy later said.[13] A few hours later, Hoover told the attorney general that he thought "we had the man" who had done the shooting.[14] As he explained to Robert Kennedy's assistant later that day, a communist sympathizer named Lee Oswald, a "nut" of the "extremist pro-Castro crowd," had been arrested by Dallas police after he had apparently killed a police officer.[15]

Hoover made up his mind within hours of the assassination that it would be best for the country—and, not incidentally, for himself and the FBI—to conclude that Oswald had acted alone. Besides his ideological preference for blaming an American communist for the assassination, Hoover also had professional reasons for declaring the case to be closed. After all, if Oswald was *not* a lone nut—if there had in fact been a plot to kill the president—then people might think that the FBI should have uncovered and stopped it. Ergo, Hoover quickly decided, there was no conspiracy. Ironically, the man who had done more than any American to spread the anticommunist conspiracy theory now became the nation's most fervent debunker of conspiracy theories.

Moreover, Hoover worried that a real investigation might prompt the excitable public to demand war with Russia—a war that could quickly go nuclear. Hoover pointed out to Walter Jenkins, a Johnson aide, that Oswald had recently visited the Cuban and Soviet embassies in Mexico City. He had even sent a letter to "the man in the Soviet Embassy who is in charge of assassinations and similar activities on the part of the Soviet government." Oswald had also defected to the Soviet Union and lived there for two years. Any discussion of conspiracy, Hoover concluded, might "complicate" the U.S. relationship with the Soviet Union.[16] Though he used euphemisms, Hoover's underlying point was clear: a thorough investigation could lead to conclusions that no one wanted to hear.

At first, it seemed that Hoover's lone gunman theory would be easy to prove. Investigators quickly found abundant evidence tying the suspect to the assassination. He had worked at the Texas School Book Depository on Dealey Plaza, where police found a sniper's nest, a Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, and three bullet casings on the sixth floor. A man fitting his description had shot and killed a Dallas police officer shortly after the assassination. Soon investigators would find proof that Oswald owned the Mannlicher-Carcano and that he had even posed for a picture while holding it. Moreover, the FBI had been watching Oswald for years, and agents knew that he was a violent, unstable sociopath prone to ideological extremism.

At various times in his short life, Oswald had been a U.S. Marine, an American communist, a Soviet communist, a professed anti-Soviet, a Castro supporter, and a member of an anti-Castro group—and sometimes he fit into two or more of these categories at the same time. Born in New Orleans in 1939, he had joined the Marines in the 1950s and served on

an air base in Japan. While in the Marines, he subscribed to a Russian-language newspaper, earnestly plowed through *Das Kapital*, and talked of traveling to Cuba to join Castro's revolution.[17] In 1959 he defected to the country he viewed as paradise on earth, the Soviet Union. He worked in Minsk in a radio factory for two years, married a Russian woman, and started a family. But he grew increasingly disillusioned with life under communism, and in 1962 he returned with his wife, Marina, and their baby to the United States and moved to Texas.[18]

This erstwhile communist settled in an area known for its fanatical anticommunism. Dallas was the home of several right-wing leaders who believed that Kennedy was masterminding a conspiracy to turn the country over to the United Nations, which they believed was controlled by communists. The most prominent of these anticommunist conspiracists was Edwin A. Walker, a retired general who had been relieved of command in 1961 for indoctrinating his troops with extremist propaganda.[19] The general thought that the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Earl Warren, was plotting to destroy the United States by promoting civil rights and banning prayer in schools. "This is the conspiracy of the crucifixion by anti-Christ conspirators of the Supreme Court," Walker proclaimed in 1962, "in their denial of prayer and their betrayal of a nation."[20]

Oswald was a conspiracist of a different kind. Despite his alienation from Soviet communism, Oswald despised men like Walker, who was a "fascist," he told his wife. In April 1963, according to Marina, he became convinced that it was his destiny to kill Walker and save the world from the general's dangerous conspiracism. He ordered a rifle through the mail, stole up to Walker's home at night, and shot at him through a window. The general narrowly survived the assassination attempt. Later, Marina shut her husband in a bathroom to stop him from shooting Richard Nixon when the former vice president visited Dallas.[21]

By 1963 Lee Oswald had become convinced that the young revolutionary leader of Cuba represented the best hope for the future. After moving to New Orleans, Oswald formed a one-man chapter of a national pro-Castro organization, Fair Play for Cuba, and was arrested in the summer of 1963 for brawling with anti-Castro Cubans. He debated the leader of the local anti-Castro group on New Orleans radio. In September 1963, he took a bus to Mexico City, where he talked to officials at the Cuban and Soviet embassies. He wanted a visa to return to the Soviet Union, he said, and

also permission to visit Cuba along the way. When both countries told him that it would take months to process the visas, he returned, full of fury, to Dallas, where Marina was living with friends.[22]

Despite his numerous pro-Castro statements, Oswald once joined an *anti*-Castro group, apparently in the hope of spying on its members. In Dallas he befriended a mysterious Russian baron who had fled the Bolsheviks. He expressed admiration for George Orwell's antitotalitarian novel, *Animal Farm*. Because of his unusual history, some scholars would later insist that Oswald was actually a fervent anticommunist.[23]

But those theories came later. At the time, it seemed clear that Oswald had seen himself as a warrior for communism. He had, after all, defected to Russia, passed out "Hands Off Cuba" flyers, and defended Fidel Castro to friends, acquaintances, and a radio audience in New Orleans. While in custody, he appeared to make a clenched-fist salute, recognized by militants as a symbol of revolution.[24]

In Washington after the assassination and Oswald's arrest, Hoover learned of the alleged assassin's past with a certain sense of vindication. In a way, Hoover had spent his entire life waiting for this moment. Early in his career, he had worked to deport the anarchist Emma Goldman, who, in his view, had inspired the crazed Marxist assassin of President William McKinley. More than forty years after Goldman's deportation he had caught the next presidential killer, another demented Marxist. As Hoover explained to a Justice Department official on the phone on the day of the assassination, "almost all" assassins had "some imaginary grievance," usually communist or anarchist. As an example, Hoover talked at length about McKinley's killer, Leon Czolgosz.[25]

Ironically, Hoover could not gloat in public. Because of their fear of nuclear confrontation with the Soviets, Hoover, Johnson, and other administration officials consciously underplayed Oswald's possible political motives. Indeed, when the White House heard that an assistant district attorney in Dallas was considering the idea of charging Oswald with perpetrating a "communist conspiracy," a Johnson aide immediately demanded that the district attorney's office delete any reference in the indictment to communism or conspiracies. The D.A. then called his assistant and yelled at him, "What the hell are you trying to do, start World War III?"[26] The federal authorities thus quashed any suggestion that Oswald was as ideologically motivated as Czolgosz. They wanted the

American public to see him as a generic psychopath, not an ideologically motivated one.

Though the Johnson administration wanted to prove the case in a quick and persuasive trial, it had not anticipated the incompetence of the Dallas police. Throughout Oswald's brief incarceration, the department was open and accessible to reporters and to the merely curious. Jack Ruby, a police informer and the owner of a local striptease club, wandered through the halls and even stood within three feet of Oswald at one point. In between interrogation sessions, the police moved the prisoner through the throngs of reporters, and he responded to their questions by claiming that he had not killed anyone. "I'm just a patsy!" he once shrieked.[27] As police moved Oswald to the county jail, Ruby pushed his way through the crowd and shot the accused murderer on live television.

The killing transformed the suspect from a figure of revulsion to one of mystery, especially when the nation learned that Ruby had friends in the mafia.[28] Was Oswald, after all, more than just "some silly little Communist," as Jacqueline Kennedy had called him privately?[29] Had he een silenced by the real conspirators? To many Americans, the murder equired a government investigation of a possible conspiracy.

To Washington elites, though, the murder of Oswald required a differnt response: an official report naming him as the lone assassin. President ohnson agreed that it would be best for the country not to probe too eeply into the killing. To utter the word "conspiracy" in public, Johnson elieved, might risk nuclear war. The new president believed that Castro ight have ordered the killing—"I never believed that Oswald acted one," he said later—but he did not really want to know for sure.[30] If he ad proof that Castro was behind the murder, then he would be forced to vade Cuba, and the Soviets might respond by launching World War III. oreover, rumors were flying that Johnson himself had ordered the killing that he could assume the presidency. It was best for the survival of the orld, not just for his own political future, if the conspiracy theories were ashed—immediately.

Just hours after Ruby killed Oswald, the deputy U.S. attorney general, cholas Katzenbach, who was effectively running the Justice Department the grief-stricken Robert Kennedy, wrote a document outlining the ernment's goals. The Katzenbach memo would later be cited by many spiracy theorists as evidence that the government never wanted a real

investigation of the murder. In the memo, Katzenbach told President Johnson that the public must be satisfied "that Oswald was the assassin; that he did not have confederates who are still at large; and that the evidence was such that he would have been convicted at trial."[31] In other words, Johnson must convince the public of something he personally did not believe.

To accomplish this, Johnson decided to appoint a blue-ribbon commission to investigate the assassination. Just as President Roosevelt had appointed Supreme Court Justice Owen Roberts to head a probe of the intelligence failure at Pearl Harbor, Johnson created an independent board to reassure the public that the government was not hiding anything. Like Roosevelt, Johnson turned to the Supreme Court for the leader of this investigation. The Chief Justice, the liberal icon Earl Warren, did not want to take the job. But Johnson, known for his intense, high-pressure lobbying tactics, invoked the specter of nuclear holocaust to persuade him. "Now these wild people are chargin' Khrushchev killed Kennedy, and Castro killed Kennedy, and everybody else killed Kennedy," Johnson said. "Now we've had sixty FBI agents working for seven days, and they've got the story, and they've got the fingerprints, and they've got everything else. But the American people and the world have *got to know* who *killed* Kennedy and *why*, and somebody's got to evaluate that report. And if they don't, why, [if] Khrushchev moved on us, he could kill 39 million in an hour."[32] Faced with that harrowing prospect, Warren agreed to serve.

The FBI already knew who killed the president, Johnson said. *They've got the story*. The commission just needed to validate that story. After Warren reluctantly agreed to be the chairman, the president carefully chose the other members. The commission included two seasoned cold warriors, former CIA director Allen Dulles and John McCloy, the former high commissioner to Germany; two senators, Republican John Cooper of Kentucky and Democrat Richard Russell of Georgia; and two congressmen, Republican Gerald Ford of Michigan and Democrat Hale Boggs of Louisiana. As he selected his commissioners and cajoled them into serving, Johnson frequently used the argument about avoiding nuclear war.[33] Indeed, one scholar has argued that Johnson's determination to avoid an investigation into a possible communist conspiracy might have saved the world from a catastrophic nuclear exchange.[34]

The Warren Commission was not only created to discredit conspiracy theories about the communists. It was also designed to ensure that the

assassination investigators did not discover the skeletons in the Kennedy administration's closet, especially Kennedy's plots against Castro. All seven commissioners were charter members of the Washington establishment who could be trusted to stick to the script given them by the president and the FBI. "All you're gonna do," Johnson told Richard Russell, "is evaluate a Hoover report that he's already *made*."[35] The president thought he could trust Russell and his fellow commissioners not to challenge that report, or to dig too deeply into the government's secrets.

And so the government began an investigation that was not really an investigation. Top officials realized that an aggressive inquiry would reveal explosive secrets—secrets about the competence of the FBI, the character of the slain president, and the morality of U.S. policy toward Cuba. Moreover, a real investigation of JFK's murder might lead to the ultimate horror: a nuclear exchange with Russia.

As a result, officials at the FBI, the CIA, and the White House decided to set limits on the investigation of the assassination. These leaders were not trying to protect the "real killers." Instead, they were statists trying to maintain Americans' trust in their system of governance. Ironically, their lies would shatter that trust.

BOTH THE CIA and the FBI had secrets that they hoped they could bury with Kennedy. The FBI's secret was mundane, but nevertheless vital to the men who ran the bureau. FBI officials hoped fervently that the Warren Commission would never discover the extent of the bureau's "gross incompetency," in Hoover's words.[36] The FBI had known before Kennedy visited Dallas that Oswald was violent, unstable, politically extreme, and employed at a warehouse on the president's motorcade route. Moreover, Oswald had threatened the U.S. government in person at the FBI field office in Dallas. The bureau had a system for monitoring people who might harm the government: it put their names on lists called the Security Index and the Reserve Index, which included tens of thousands of Americans. Linus Pauling was on one of them.[37] Oswald was not on either one.[38] Hoover's first priority was to cover up this embarrassing fact.

As a Soviet redefector, Oswald had fallen into the FBI's vast domestic surveillance net. Agents in Dallas and New Orleans had interviewed him three times in 1962 and 1963. Initially, the agents did not believe that Oswald merited more attention, and they closed his file. But when the

CIA notified the Dallas FBI office that Oswald had made mysterious visits to the Cuban and Soviet embassies in Mexico City, Special Agent James Hosty decided to reopen the case and interview the defector again. In early November 1963, Hosty made two attempts to talk to Oswald, but saw only Marina and a friend with whom she was staying.[39]

A few days after Hosty's visits to his wife, Oswald showed up at the Dallas FBI field office in a furious mood. When he learned that Hosty was out of the office, Oswald scrawled a two-paragraph note accusing Hosty of harassing his wife and threatening to take action against the FBI if he ever approached her again. When Hosty returned, he read the note and tossed it into a box on his desk. The FBI received these sorts of threats all the time. It was "no big deal," he decided.[40]

Hosty came to regret that decision. On the afternoon of the assassination, as he combed through his files at the field office, looking for clues to the killing, Hosty heard some horrifying news: Dallas police had just arrested one of his surveillance subjects, a violent, known political extremist whom he was supposed to monitor. He hurriedly briefed his supervisor, who ordered him to go to the police department and help with the questioning.[41]

When Hosty returned to the FBI field office he found Gordon Shanklin, the special agent in charge for Dallas, sitting at his desk, holding the Oswald note. "What the hell is this?" Hosty dismissed the note, saying it was "just your typical guff." This explanation infuriated his boss. "What the hell do you think Hoover's going to do if he finds out about this note!" he shouted. He ordered Hosty to type up a memo explaining his contacts with Oswald, then put the note and the memo in the "do not file" file—a Hoover-era designation for memos the FBI never wanted outsiders to see.[42]

On Sunday, November 24, after Ruby killed Oswald, Shanklin called Hosty to his office and handed him the note and his memo. "Here, take these," he said. "I don't ever want to see them again." Hosty started to tear up the documents. "No! Not here!" Shanklin protested. "I told you, I don't want to see them again. Now get them out of here." Hosty took the papers to the bathroom, tore them into tiny pieces, and flushed them down the toilet.[43] Later, the receptionist asked Hosty what had happened to the Oswald letter. "What letter?" he replied.[44]

When Hoover learned about the letter, he ordered an internal investigation of the bureau's failure in the Oswald case. He ultimately censured seventeen agents—men who offered "asinine" excuses, in his view—for

their "gross incompetency." Some of the agents received letters of censure; others were transferred or suspended without pay. The agents all insisted that Oswald had not met the criteria for inclusion on the Security Index. Hoover scoffed at this defense. "They were worse than mistaken," he wrote. "Certainly no one in full possession of all his faculties could claim Oswald didn't fall within this criteria."[45] The punishments were kept secret, though. As the FBI assistant director explained, Americans might interpret the official rebukes as "a direct admission that we are responsible for negligence which might have resulted in the assassination of the President."[46]

But Hoover went beyond concealing the bureau's negligence. Opposed n principle to the whole idea of an investigation independent of the FBI, ne did everything he could to thwart the work of the Warren Commission taff. As a later Senate inquiry concluded, the commission was "perceived s an adversary by both Hoover and senior FBI officials."[47]

FBI officials also failed to investigate new leads that might undermine he lone gunman theory. In particular, they showed a remarkable lack of nterest in one bystander's wounds. On the day of the assassination, James ague, who had been watching the motorcade, told a deputy sheriff that e believed he had been hit by fragments from a stray bullet. As the shots ang out, his face had been "stung" and wounded by small objects. Tague nd the deputy found the place on the curb where a bullet, or a fragment of bullet, had struck the curb and sent pieces of concrete into his face.

After noting his injury in a report, the FBI did not seem interested Tague's story. Agents did not examine the curb until months after the ssassination, when local officials, spurred on by news accounts, demanded at the FBI or the Warren Commission investigate the story. The commissioners had already finished their investigation when Tague's injury as brought to their attention, so staff members hastily added a paragraph ggesting that Tague might have been wounded by a fragment from the llet that shattered the president's head, or by a fragment from a missed ot.[48] Many later critics found this explanation incredible and concluded at there must have been another shot and a second gunman.[49]

The fascination of the "Tague shot" for assassination researchers consts with the FBI's astonishing lack of curiosity about the path of the buls. Within hours of Kennedy's death Hoover decided where the bullets ne from. He did not care where they went.

According to one of his top deputies, "Hoover's main thought was always how to cover, how to protect himself."[50] In the Kennedy assassination, the way to protect himself was to ensure that the Warren Commission concluded that Oswald was a lone nut and there was no way the FBI could have stopped him. "The thing I am concerned about," Hoover said in a telephone call to presidential aide Walter Jenkins on the day Oswald was killed, "...is having something issued so we can convince the public that Oswald is the real assassin."[51] Oswald may have been the real assassin, but the FBI's refusal to consider alternatives ensured that conspiracy theories would flourish.

WHILE THE FBI was trying to cover up its incompetence, the CIA worked to protect far more significant secrets. In trying to hide its own attempts to murder foreign leaders, the CIA obscured the cold war context of the assassination and robbed it of its political meaning.

Many citizens had long believed that a powerful, centralized spy agency undermined American values of openness and limited government. In 1944, when the wartime spy chief William Donovan proposed a plan for the U.S. government's first centralized intelligence group, critics responded that a spy agency was an un-American idea. The *Chicago Tribune* lambasted Donovan's proposed intelligence agency as a "Gestapo" and quoted congressmen who foresaw the dawning of a totalitarian police state in Washington. "What is it they call that Russian spy system—the OGPU? It would certainly be nice to have one of those in our own country," one Republican senator commented dryly. Critics charged that the new agency would give too much power to the executive branch. The *Tribune* speculated that the new spy director could "determine American foreign policy by weeding out, withholding, or coloring information gathered at his direction."[52] These isolationist skeptics combined with military officers, who wanted to control intelligence themselves, and J. Edgar Hoover, who wanted to protect the FBI's bureaucratic turf, to kill the 1944 plan for a spy agency.[53]

But in 1947 President Truman decided to try again. He was convinced that the U.S. government needed a strong, central spy agency to compete against the Soviet Union in the cold war. To overcome Congress's fears that the new Central Intelligence Agency might be used against Americans, Truman promised that it would have no internal security or police func-

tions and would not operate within the United States.[54] But although the law was clear that the CIA could not act at home, it was vague about its powers abroad. The CIA's charter contained an "elastic clause," which permitted it to perform "other functions and duties related to intelligence affecting the national security as the National Security Council may from time to time direct." By the early 1950s, these "other functions and duties" included the overthrow of democratically elected governments. By the early 1960s, they included assassination plots against foreign leaders.

Only a handful of government officials knew about the CIA's covert actions, but they had no doubt that they were justified. After all, the United States was facing "an implacable enemy whose avowed objective is world domination," as an influential, top-secret 1954 report on the CIA's expanded mission explained. There were "no rules in such a game." Perilous times required brutal methods. "If the United States is to survive," the report said, "long-standing American concepts of 'fair play' must be reconsidered. We must...learn to subvert, sabotage and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated and more effective methods than those used against us."[55]

The CIA was particularly eager to reconsider "American concepts of fair play'" in Cuba. Before Castro's revolution in 1959, the Caribbean nation had been a favorite spot for Americans seeking offshore opportunities for profit and sin. American mobsters controlled many of the casinos in Havana, as well as the thriving prostitution and abortion businesses. Throughout the 1950s, the Cuban dictator, Fulgencio Batista, had protected American businessmen of the legal and illegal variety.[56]

But after Castro toppled Batista's government, he closed the casinos and forced the mafia back to their homes in the United States. He soon began expropriating the Cuban holdings of American businesses, accepting aid from the Soviet Union, and ruthlessly purging his political opponents.

As Castro embraced the Soviets, American leaders reacted with increasing alarm. Besides their economic and ideological reasons for opposing Castro, U.S. officials also worried about the domestic political consequences of the Cuban Revolution. Ever since Joe McCarthy inveighed against the "conspiracy so immense," American politicians understood the dangers of appearing "soft" on communism. Because anticommunist extremists accused Truman of "losing" China, first Eisenhower and then Kennedy resolved not to lose Cuba. In this way, the anticommunist conspiracy

theory of the 1950s prompted two successive presidents to adopt a Cuba policy that might have led to Kennedy's death.

Because American leaders feared provoking the Soviets with an all-out invasion of Cuba, the secret warriors at the CIA handled the attempts to overthrow Castro. In April 1961, the Kennedy administration tried to overthrow the revolutionary government with an army of Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs. The assault ended disastrously for the exile invaders and the United States, and Kennedy never tried to invade Cuba again. He did, however, continue Eisenhower's more secretive methods of getting rid of Castro. Kennedy intensified the CIA-sponsored sabotage operations in Cuba, dubbed "Operation Mongoose" (because it takes a mongoose to kill a snake). Agents tried to destabilize the Castro government with commando raids, espionage, and sabotage. At the same time, the CIA worked harder on its Eisenhower-era assassination plots, especially those using the mafia.[57]

CIA officials quickly realized that they shared certain interests with American mobsters in Cuba. The agency wanted to eliminate a threat to U.S. national security; the mafia, as one CIA report later said, wanted to regain its "gambling, prostitution, and dope monopolies."[58] It was logical, CIA covert operations chief Richard Bissell believed, that they should work together. In the last months of the Eisenhower administration, Bissell engaged Robert Maheu, a shady ex-FBI agent with contacts in the underworld, to arrange an assassination bankrolled by the U.S. government and carried out by the mafia. Maheu was a "cut-out," the man who would transact the details of the "dirty business" for the U.S. government so that government employees did not have to sully their hands.[59] Maheu in turn contacted Johnny Rosselli, a notorious Las Vegas mobster, and asked him to arrange a CIA-mafia deal.

In a suite at the opulent Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami Beach, a CIA officer met with two underworld bosses to discuss hiring them to murder a neighboring head of state. The CIA viewed Sam Giancana, the mob boss of Chicago, and Santo Trafficante, the mafia chieftain of Miami and formerly of Cuba, as "businessmen with interests in Cuba who saw the elimination of Castro as the first essential step to the recovery of their investments."[60] The attorney general saw them as two of the most dangerous men in the country and put them on his ten most-wanted list.[61] In one of many ironies, the FBI was hunting them down while the CIA was hiring them to commit crimes.

The U.S. government developed plans to drop poison pills in Castro's drinks and to plant an exploding seashell in his favorite scuba-diving bay. It customized a diving suit for Castro by dusting it with a skin-destroying fungus and contaminating its breathing tubes with the bacterium that causes tuberculosis. It also delivered guns and ammunition to teams of hit men. On November 22, 1963, as Kennedy was dying in Dallas, one of his CIA operatives was delivering a hypodermic needle concealed in a ballpoint pen to a Cuban in Paris. The CIA planned for the Cuban to fill the pen with poison and stab Castro with it.[62]

After the Kennedy assassination, the agency abandoned this particular lan, but other plots continued. President Johnson later ended the program, claiming that he was horrified to learn that "we had been operating damned Murder Inc. in the Caribbean."[63]

Although Johnson apparently did not approve of the Castro plots, resident Kennedy and his brother Robert almost certainly did. CIA officials later testified that they had used "circumlocutious terms" in briefing op White House officials, but that everyone had known what they were alking about.[64] Indeed, CIA officials claimed that the attorney general had een the driving force behind the plots, furious at Castro for humiliating is brother at the Bay of Pigs. Richard Helms, the covert action chief at e time, said that Robert Kennedy had told him to "get rid" of Castro. I heard him use those words," Helms said. "We had a whip on our backs. I take off my shirt, I'll show you the scars."[65]

The Kennedys also had another source of information about the Castro ots: the all-knowing J. Edgar Hoover. Thanks to surveillance and detective ork, Hoover's agents learned of the CIA's Castro plots, of Giancana's paripation, and, most important for the president, of another link between iancana and John Kennedy. As it happened, one of Giancana's mistresses, dith Campbell, was also involved with President Kennedy. Hoover prepared memo on the complicated relationships (titled "JUDITH E. CAMPBELL; SSOCIATE OF HOODLUMS") and took it to a private meeting with the esident in March 1962.[66] No record exists of the meeting, but one can sume that the FBI chief sketched the whole picture for the president: the stress, the murder plots, and the mob connections. "J. Edgar Hoover has k Kennedy by the balls," Lyndon Johnson told some reporters privately.[67]

Although the American people did not know that their government was rking with mobsters to kill Castro, the plots were common knowledge

in Havana. Castro documented several U.S.-sponsored attempts on his life, and he later turned the evidence over to a U.S. senator. In September 1963 he issued an unmistakable threat against John Kennedy. "United States leaders," he said in an interview with the Associated Press, "should think that if they are aiding in terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders, they themselves will not be safe."[68]

The Associated Press article on the Castro threat ran in several American newspapers, including the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. Oswald, a dedicated newspaper reader, was in New Orleans at the time.[69] Did he read the story? Could he have decided to kill Kennedy because Kennedy was trying to kill Castro? Americans will never know. Because instead of investigating the potential link between the Castro plots and Kennedy's murder, the CIA immediately set out to cover it up.

Throughout the Warren Commission investigation, former CIA director Allen Dulles never told his fellow commissioners or their staff about the Castro plots. Years later commission staff members testified that knowledge of these plots would have profoundly influenced their investigation and conclusions. The CIA's secrets about the Castro plots, the former commission counsel Burt Griffin said, "lead not only to the issue of possible conspirators with Oswald, but also his motive."[70]

For his part, Lyndon Johnson was convinced that the Castro plots had led to Kennedy's assassination. Before his death in 1973, he told many people—his friends, his publisher, and at least four reporters—that he believed that Castro had organized a successful conspiracy to kill Kennedy. "Kennedy was trying to get to Castro, but Castro got to him first," he once said.[71] Robert Kennedy also seemed to connect the Castro plots to his brother's assassination, and to suffer from overwhelming guilt as a result.[72] To his closest friends he confessed doubts about the attempts to topple Castro. "I have myself wondered at times," he said, "if we did not pay a very great price for being more energetic than wise about a lot of things, especially Cuba."[73]

But Robert still refused to discuss publicly the possibility of a conspiracy. Finding the truth would not bring his brother back. The true story of their Cuba policy would also tarnish JFK's image, and that of the entire country, in the eyes of the world. There were some secrets, he believed, it was best never to reveal. When the Warren Commission asked Robert if he had any additional information that might shed light on the assassination,

he replied that the commission had already received "all information relating in any way to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy *in the possession of the Department of Justice*."[74] It was an artfully worded letter. As Robert knew, the CIA was in possession of a great deal more information, but he, like Allen Dulles, declined to inform the commission of this.

ALL OF OFFICIAL WASHINGTON—the CIA, the FBI, the White House, and the Kennedy family—expected the Warren Commission to conclude that one sociopath had killed the president. The Warren Commission members and staff were generally willing to follow this scenario. But their determination to prove the lone gunman theory encountered two unanticipated problems.

Most later Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories would focus on two key pieces of physical evidence: the silent movie of the killing made by a bystander, local dressmaker Abraham Zapruder, and the president's body. In both cases, the U.S. government's examination of the evidence was rushed, incompetent, and unconvincing.

The Warren Commission started with the assumption that the assassin had fired three shots. This seemed relatively uncontroversial at first: the FBI had found three cartridge cases on the sixth floor of the book depository, and the majority of witnesses had heard three shots. In its initial report on the assassination, the FBI concluded that the three shots had all hit something: the first shot hit Kennedy in the neck, the second wounded Texas Governor John Connally, who was in the limousine with the president, and the third hit the president's head and killed him.

The Zapruder film captured the drama and all its grisly details on film. On the day of the assassination, Zapruder had clambered to the top of a concrete pillar midway up a grassy slope, hoping to use the added height to get a good picture of the presidential motorcade with his color movie camera. Unlike most of the other amateur photographers on the plaza that day, he kept filming even after he heard the gunshots. In its first frames, the two couples in the car, John and Jacqueline Kennedy and John and Nellie Connally, seem smiling and relaxed. Suddenly, Kennedy grabs his throat, then Connally slumps down. In its most disturbing sequence, the film shows Kennedy's head blown apart by a lethal shot.

Zapruder's twenty-six-second color movie helped to spawn generations of Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories. Even before it was released

to the public in 1975, its still frames, reprinted in *Life* magazine the week after the assassination, raised troubling questions about the government's official narrative. At the same time, the film provided clues to an alternative narrative and seemed to give critics the power to solve the puzzle of the assassination themselves.[75]

The commission quickly discovered that the Zapruder film complicated its initial theory about the path of the bullets. In the movie, Connally reacts to his wounds less than two seconds after Kennedy. But an FBI marksman needed *more* than two seconds—at least 2.3—to fire two shots with Oswald's rifle. In other words, Oswald did not have enough time to take a separate shot at Connally. Either the same bullet hit both men, or different gunmen shot them. "To say that they were hit by separate bullets," a commission counsel said, "is synonymous with saying that there were two assassins."[76] Because the commission was committed to the one-assassin theory, the conclusion was obvious: one bullet must have hit both men.

But this conclusion forced the commission to posit an extraordinary path for this single bullet, the "magic bullet," as critics later called it. According to the commission's theory, this bullet struck Kennedy in the back, tore through his body, exited his throat, plowed into Connally's shoulder, came out his chest, wounded his wrist, and finally came to a stop in his thigh, where it rested until it fell out onto the governor's stretcher at Parkland Hospital, where it was later found by an orderly.[77]

The commission needed evidence to support its theory from the autopsy of the president: in other words, proof that the bullet in question had passed all the way through Kennedy's body. And here the investigators encountered problems that would later cast doubt on their work.

The autopsy was conducted at the Navy hospital in Bethesda, Maryland, which Jacqueline Kennedy chose because her husband had been in the Navy. At the hospital, in a tower suite high above the crowded, hectic morgue, Jacqueline and Robert Kennedy pressured the pathologists to finish their grim task as soon as possible. The attorney general and one of the late president's aides, Kenneth O'Donnell, repeatedly called the autopsy room and demanded to know when it would be over. James Humes, the head pathologist, later conceded that the family's interference served to "harass us and cause difficulty—of course it did, how could it not!"[78] Feeling pressed for time, the pathologists failed to take several routine steps, such as shaving the head, inspecting the clothing, and dissecting the wounds.[79]

Most important, the doctors did not trace the path of one of the bullets. The pathologists could not discover the path of the bullet that hit Kennedy in his back, nor could they find the bullet itself or its exit point. "It was bothering me very greatly, like nothing you can imagine," that they could not find the bullet or its exit wound, Humes later said.[80] However, they decided to put off that vexing question for another day.[81]

The Kennedy family's desire to keep the late president's secrets probably contributed to the doctors' rush to finish the autopsy prematurely. John Kennedy had suffered from Addison's disease, which was a treatable but serious disorder of the adrenal glands, and from repeated bouts of venereal disease. Selling himself as a youthful, energetic presidential candidate in 1960, he had consistently misled the public about his illnesses. His brother did not want the country to discover those lies.[82] The autopsy doctors, in other words, were handicapped by the Kennedys' desire to conceal certain facts about JFK's (live) body.

The next morning, Humes talked to one of the physicians who had treated the president in Dallas. He already knew that the emergency room doctors, in a desperate, doomed attempt to save the president's life, had performed a tracheotomy. But in talking to the Dallas doctor, Humes learned something astounding: the tracheotomy had obliterated an exit wound in Kennedy's neck. "The light came on," Humes explained, and he realized that the bullet must have entered the president's back and exited his neck.[83] He wrote this in his final report, which thus supported the single-bullet theory.

But the FBI agents at the autopsy were not privy to this enlightening conversation. According to their official report, the autopsy had proved that the problematic bullet had penetrated a short distance into Kennedy's body, and then apparently fallen out later at the hospital. It had not, in other words, barreled all the way through his body and gone on to hit Connally. The Warren Commission did not include the FBI report in its twenty-six volumes of hearings and exhibits, but in June 1966 a graduate student in physics at U.C. Berkeley requested it from the National Archives. Archivists mailed him a copy of the five-page report, and a controversy was born.[84]

In short, the forensic pathologists who conducted the autopsy and the FBI agents who observed it filed contradictory reports about the path of this bullet. For skeptics of the official story, the differing versions of the

bullet's path would provide tantalizing hints of a conspiracy (though, one should note, a conspiracy burdened by a rather ineffective cover-up).

For his part, Connally, though an advocate of the lone gunman theory, was absolutely certain that he was hit by a second shot. "They talk about the 'one-bullet or two-bullet theory,' but as far as I'm concerned, there is no 'theory,'" he told *Life* magazine in 1966. "There is my absolute knowledge, and Nellie's too, that one bullet caused the President's first wound, and that an entirely separate shot struck me."[85] Indeed, many of the Warren Commission staff members did not believe the single-bullet theory at first, but ultimately embraced it as the only way to reconcile their interpretation of the Zapruder film with their conviction that Oswald had acted alone.

The commission's reconstruction of the assassination, in short, was shaped from the beginning by the members' determination to reach a predetermined conclusion. It was unpersuasive even to the men who came up with it. This does not mean that their conclusion of a single bullet or a lone gunman was wrong.[86] It does mean, however, that the commission was primarily a public relations exercise, as Robert Kennedy later told an aide, meant to placate the American public.[87] It was not meant to discover the truth.

The single-bullet theory was so unconvincing that even most of the commission members refused to believe it at first. Six of the seven members expressed doubts about it, with Allen Dulles the lone exception. Senator Richard Russell was so disgusted by the "magic bullet" theory that he initially rejected it in a separate dissent. As a senator, Russell was accustomed to the tradition of minority and majority reports. The Pearl Harbor Committee, for example, had issued two completely antithetical reports. Warren, however, wanted a unanimous report, and he was determined to get it. He told Russell that his dissent would be noted in the report, and then simply ignored it.[88] The "unanimous" report said that there was no credible evidence of a conspiracy and that a single bullet hit Kennedy and Connally. Russell voiced his doubts to President Johnson in a candid phone conversation. "They said that they believe...that the Commission believe[s] that the same bullet that hit Kennedy hit Connally. *Well,*" Russell said, obviously irate that his views were misrepresented, "*I don't believe it.*" Johnson responded, "I don't either."[89]

THOUGH THE PRESIDENT and at least one of the commission members did not believe the Warren Report, they had utmost confidence in their ability

to persuade the public to do so. At first, they seemed successful: the proportion of Americans who suspected a conspiracy dropped from 62 percent immediately after the assassination to 31 percent after the release of the report.[90] But from the start, there were some citizens who refused to accept the official version of the assassination, who thought that it "smelled awfully bad," in the words of one critic.[91] And they set out to prove that their government was covering up a conspiracy.

Around the country, from the day of the assassination, ordinary Americans began to clip and file stories about the investigation with the goal of finding the "real truth." Like Shirley Martin, the most ambitious traveled to Dallas to retrace Oswald's path or interview witnesses themselves.

The first skeptics labored in obscurity and isolation, but they soon began forming a grassroots network around the country. They identified each other through their impassioned letters to the editor charging conspiracy or through the angry articles they published in small, mostly left-wing publications. In October 1965, the first group of ten "Warrenologists" gathered in the Manhattan apartment of Sylvia Meagher, who knew more about the Kennedy assassination than anyone else in the world, according to her admiring fellow skeptics.[92] The East Coast critics corresponded with other researchers throughout the country in an increasingly specialized language: there was "LHO" (Oswald), the "TSBD" (Texas school book depository), and frequent references to "frame 313" and "CE 133-B," which identified frames of the Zapruder film and Warren Commission exhibits to insiders. Above all, they believed that the world had changed on "11/22/63."

The critics lived in different parts of the country, in small towns and large cities, in tiny apartments and rambling California ranch houses. They were businessmen, teachers, graduate students, and housewives. But despite their differences, the assassination researchers, as they called themselves, shared a common belief: they knew, beyond all possible doubt, that the U.S. government was lying to them.

The earliest Warren Report critics had been skeptical of the truthfulness of the federal government for years. A surprising number were direct victims of McCarthyism or had defended victims of McCarthyism. Meagher had successfully fought to keep her job in 1953 after investigators questioned her loyalty.[93] Harold Weisberg, who self-published an

early critique of the Warren Report, *Whitewash,* and who went on to write *Whitewash II* and several other Kennedy assassination conspiracy books, had been fired by the State Department after a loyalty probe in 1947.[94] John Henry Faulk, who helped lead the Committee to Investigate Assassinations, lost his career in radio in the 1950s because of his alleged ties to communists. Two other directors of the committee, Fred Cook and Bud Fensterwald, actively opposed the Red Scare, Cook as a journalist and Fensterwald as a State Department analyst.[95] And chemist Linus Pauling, who had been spied on and harassed by the FBI, immediately suspected a government cover-up in the assassination.

Some of the skeptics even identified personally with the alleged assassin, who they suspected had been framed. The government's habit of demonizing leftists had cost some of them their friends, their jobs, and their privacy. They had been interrogated, humiliated, and spied on by federal agents, often for no reason other than their enthusiasm for labor rights or civil liberties. Could government agents have done even worse to Oswald?

Meagher was convinced that they had. From the moment she learned of the assassination, she believed that the government would find a convenient "communist" to blame.[96] Determined to find the truth, she devoted every spare minute to researching the murder. She molded the scattered, isolated assassination researchers into a unified movement.

When Meagher gathered the first group of researchers in her living room, the vast majority of Americans did not share their skepticism; they trusted their government to tell them the truth. They believed President Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara when they said that U.S. warships had been attacked without provocation in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964. They supported Congress's overwhelming vote to give the president a blank check to stop the advance of communism in Vietnam. Indeed, 1964—the year of the Warren Report, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and Lyndon Johnson's landslide election victory—was the high point of Americans' trust in their government, with almost 80 percent saying they trusted officials to do the right thing most or all of the time.[97]

But as the Vietnam War turned into a quagmire and prominent senators began accusing the president of lying about the war, many Americans started listening to the critics' argument that the government was lying about the JFK assassination. The public's confidence in government began

to fall by every measure beginning in 1965: growing numbers of Americans told pollsters that the government wasted "a lot of money," that it was run by "a few big interests," that it paid little attention to "what the people think," and, most important, that it could not be trusted to "do right most of the time."[98] In this atmosphere, more Americans became receptive to antigovernment conspiracy theories.

Several of the early critics had considered themselves politically liberal before the assassination, but now they saw liberals like Earl Warren as apologists for bureaucracy and for the failure of democracy in America. In the view of the skeptics, these complacent liberals, men who were now part of the establishment that liberalism was supposed to fight, used their control over information to construct a story of the JFK assassination that was a "demonstrable fraud."[99] The state had grown so big and powerful that it now had grabbed even the good liberals in its tentacles. Vincent Salandria, a lawyer and critic, told an interviewer in 1967 that he used to believe that liberals fought for equality and justice. "But as a consequence of this assassination," he explained, "I see the liberal as different. I see him as being more interested in protecting government, in even apologizing for government, surrendering the skepticism in favor of support for power."[100]

In the critics' view, their government lied about many things: about the dangers of nuclear fallout, the threat of communism, and, in time, the Vietnam War. It was not a great leap for them to believe that the government was lying about the murder of the president.

Why, though, did the government lie? Had Kennedy done something to threaten the interests of other government officials? The skeptics thought so. Kennedy had become a hero to Pauling when he signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the Soviet Union and Great Britain in 1963, thus ending the atmospheric nuclear tests that the scientist believed were leading to the premature deaths of millions of people. The treaty, Pauling had written to the president, "will go down in history as one of the greatest events in the history of the world."[101] Pauling also admired Kennedy's American University address in June 1963, in which he urged accommodation with the Soviet Union: "For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."[102]

The assassination researchers viewed the American University speech as Kennedy's "death warrant."[103] As Martin wrote to Meagher, "The Ken-

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nedys were moving (as fast as they dared) in the directions we wanted. As it was, the movement went too fast. He had to be killed."[104] Meagher agreed that after a "terrible beginning," Kennedy was "showing signs in the American University speech of growth and greatness."[105] Many critics came to believe that Kennedy was starting to confront what President Eisenhower had called the "military-industrial complex" in his farewell address in 1961.

Ironically, Kennedy had been the ultimate cold warrior, the candidate who mendaciously flogged the Republicans for allowing a "missile gap" to develop during Eisenhower's administration. His murderous anti-Castro policies might have provoked Oswald to act. But the researchers did not see Kennedy this way; to them, he was the one person challenging the military-industrial complex. And so, of course, "they" had to kill him.

Like earlier conspiracy theorists, the independent critics predicted dire consequences for the republic if the government's secrets and lies were not exposed. If Americans accepted the Warren Commission's conclusions, Salandria said, "it would mean that 1984 was with us and our experiment with democracy was ended.... I couldn't live in a society that could pull a swindle of this kind."[106] A Los Angeles sign manufacturer, Raymond Marcus, agreed that the assassination should prompt Americans "to demand other answers. Maybe they'll ask about the Rosenbergs, Hiss, the whole Cold War. Maybe we can get clean and whole. But if this stays down, there's no hope."[107]

Besides their doubts about the government's actions during the cold war, the assassination critics shared the passionate conviction that they could discover the truth about Dallas on their own. They not only questioned the interventionist foreign policy of the liberal state, they also challenged the state's monopoly on expertise. Pauling, for example, pored over enlarged prints of Dealey Plaza, searching for shadowy assassins in the haze of photographic dots. Dismissing the Warren Commission's "scientific" studies and investigation, the researchers set out to prove that ordinary American citizens had as much authority to investigate the killing of the president as the government did—indeed, that their status as amateurs gave them *more* claim to authenticity and truth. "One of the things I have learned not to trust," said Meagher, referring to the Warren Report, "is the sentence you have to read several times to get its meaning." The smooth-talking government lawyers who composed awkward sentences about

magic bullets and trajectories—all that "argle-bargle about the rifle," as Maggie Field said—failed to understand the basic absurdity of one "pristine" bullet causing seven wounds in two men.[108]

The skeptics saw this impenetrable prose as another example of a government trying to evade democratic controls and hiding important information from citizens. The officials seemed to be trying to cover up their mistakes—or their crimes—by producing a narrative that they hoped citizens would not question because they could not understand it.

In response, the critics conducted their own investigation, free from the "argle-bargle" of the state's experts. They took pictures of their sons posing with rifles in their backyards to prove their theory that the famous photo of Oswald with a Mannlicher-Carcano had been faked; they learned to use specialized tools to measure the angle from the sixth floor of the depository to the president's car; they studied the Zapruder film until they had memorized the four-hundred-odd frames and their corresponding umbers.

Their primary source material was, ironically, the very report that they ondemned as a fraud and a lie. The Warren Report comprised, the *New Yorker* writer Calvin Trillin said, "the largest body of source material any rmchair student of a crime has ever had."[109] It was not only a source: it vas, Norman Mailer said, "a species of Talmudic text begging for commenary and further elucidation."[110] The critics mined the report for evidence o discredit it. The commission did not make this task easy, issuing only name index for the twenty-six volumes of hearings and exhibits. The eport was really a government archive of documents and testimony about he Kennedy assassination—but without an index, it was a closed archive. Meagher grew so frustrated with the lack of a subject index that she spent x months compiling one.[111] In the end, she produced an index with an ttitude, with headings that pointed the intrigued reader to mistakes and ontradictions as well as official stories. It soon became required reading r all assassination investigators.[112]

In the introductory note to her index, Meagher explained that she oped her work would enable scholars "to test the assertions and concluons in the Warren Report against their independent judgment."[113] They uld use the report to attack the report. Her fellow researchers saw no ntradiction in this. "There's enough evidence in the 26 volumes to hang e Commission three times over," said Maggie Field.[114] Their reliance on

state-sanctioned information also showed the increasing difficulty of writing the history of political events without help, whether intentional or inadvertent, from the state.

The researchers worked anonymously for three years, but then two of the most articulate and well-connected critics succeeded in publishing, in the words of the comedian and filmmaker Woody Allen, the "nonfiction version of the Warren Report."[115] Mark Lane, a civil rights lawyer who had given hundreds of speeches since 1964 attacking the Warren Commission, wrote a manuscript that was rejected by fifteen publishers before it was finally published in 1966 as *Rush to Judgment*.[116] The book spent six months on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Edward Jay Epstein, a Cornell graduate student, published his master's thesis on the Warren Commission's failings, *Inquest*, that year.[117] Like Lane's book, Epstein's treatise was a phenomenal seller that helped to make criticism of the Warren Commission respectable. The critics' charges, Meagher said, were now making "the dramatic transition from taboo to dialogue."[118]

Though Lane and Epstein earned the headlines and royalties, they built on the research of a core of dedicated amateurs. David Lifton, a UCLA graduate student who later wrote his own best-selling book about the assassination, compared the critical community to a company with a public relations branch and a research-and-development branch. "The two puncture points at the top—what gets public attention—are Lane's book and Epstein's book," he explained. "The r.-and-d. program is being done by a bunch of amateurs."[119]

Many of these "amateurs" were women. In the past, when conspiracy theories flowed from the pens of prominent journalists or congressmen, most of the theorists tended to be men. But with the Kennedy assassination, the field was open to ordinary, untrained researchers—and to women. Meagher, for example, developed close friendships with other women who wanted to discover the truth about Kennedy's death. JFK's youth and good looks might have attracted more women to this particular conspiracy theory.

The Warren Commission's defenders quickly mobilized to attack these amateurs. With a few exceptions, most mainstream media outlets rushed to defend the Warren Report and to blast the critics as cranks and obsessives. "Who are the men [*sic*] who have created doubt about a document that in September, 1964, seemed to have reasonable answers?" asked the

journalist Charles Roberts. "Are they bona fide scholars, as the reviewers took them to be, or are they, as Connally has suggested, 'journalistic scavengers?' "[120] The women came in for special criticism. The authors of one 1967 attack on the assassination researchers, for example, devoted a condescending chapter to the "housewives' underground," which implied that female researchers such as Meagher and Field were looking for meaning to fill their empty lives. Meagher was singled out as the "Housewives' Supersleuth," though she was a divorcée with a full-time salaried job.[121]

Top government officials also battled the critics. Because some of the most eminent men in the United States had served on the Warren Commission, the skeptics' attack on the report "cast doubt on the whole leadership of American society," an internal CIA memo concluded. The "whole reputation of the American government" was at stake. To counter the critics, the memo urged CIA officials to seek out "friendly elite contacts" in the media and in Congress. The CIA should emphasize the selfish interests of the skeptics, whether financial or political, and suggest that "parts of the conspiracy talk appear to be deliberately generated by Communist propagandists."[122]

The CIA was partially correct: the Soviet Union did try to encourage conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination by lauding the critics and planting some false stories in communist newspapers.[123] The agency was also correct that the leading Warren Report researchers were on the far left of American politics. But some government officials leaped to the conclusion that the critics were consciously serving Moscow, which was not true. One FBI report, for example, noted ominously that Harold Weisberg, the author of the *Whitewash* books, held "an annual celebration of the Russian Revolution" at his Maryland chicken farm, evidently confusing a picnic celebrating the Jewish new year with a Bolshevik fete.[124] In a 1966 report to the president on seven critics of the Warren Report, Hoover stressed that they were all either suspected communists, associates of suspected communists, members of communist front groups, or, at the very least, former visitors to communist lands. Given their backgrounds, the FBI was not surprised that these authors had produced such "diabolical" works as Weisberg's *Whitewash* series.[125]

By 1966, as public cynicism escalated, the critics found that their arguments resonated with millions of skeptical Americans. Journalists, intellectuals, and public officials called for a new investigation. As in 1950, the

American public was afraid that unknown conspirators had put the republic in peril. And once again, as in 1950, a shrewd politician seized the opportunity to shape—and to exploit—these fears.

LIKE JOE McCARTHY, Jim Garrison was a late convert to conspiracism. In the fall of 1966, when the New Orleans district attorney discovered Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories, the independent critics had spent more than two years combing through the Warren Commission hearings, examining the Zapruder frames, and interviewing eyewitnesses. The proportion of Americans who suspected a conspiracy climbed from 31 percent in late 1964 to 50 percent in December 1966.[126] Perhaps the best barometer of public opinion was *Life*, the glossy magazine of Middle America. *Life* had consistently supported the lone-gunman theory since it had published the still frames of the Zapruder film in November 1963. But three years later, in an article titled "A Matter of Reasonable Doubt," the magazine officially joined the ranks of the skeptics.[127] The *Saturday Evening Post*, an equally conservative publication, soon followed with its own story challenging the Warren Report.[128] The December 1966 issue of *Esquire* included a "primer" of thirty-five assassination theories, including the "evil forces theory," the "Dallas oligarchy theory," and the Manchurian candidate theory.[129] Garrison could sense that a movement was starting to form, and he wanted to lead it.

The flamboyant prosecutor had been controversial since his election in 1961. A six-foot, six-inch glad-handing politico known as the "Jolly Green Giant," Garrison was regarded locally as a fearless and somewhat erratic prosecutor. Though the military had discharged him for incapacitating neuroses, Garrison had still managed to earn a law degree and the votes of a majority of the New Orleans electorate.[130] He began his term by launching well-publicized raids of gay bars and houses of prostitution on Bourbon Street. The raids were not very effective, but they won him national publicity as an aggressive reformer. The *Saturday Evening Post* gushed that he "looked like Perry Mason and sounded like Eliot Ness" and portrayed him as a straight-talking, incorruptible populist hero. Despite the powerful enemies arrayed against him, he was determined to fight for the people, he told interviewers. "The only way anyone can stop me," he said, "is to kill me." Garrison framed his campaign against brothels in New Orleans as an assault on the local establishment and, in a somewhat bizarre

logical twist, as a defense of individual rights. "People worry about the crime 'syndicate,' but the real danger is the political establishment, power massing against the individual," he said. "As an individual, I am not going to be pushed around by all the power in the state."[131] The big city prosecutor wielded some of the most arbitrary powers available to government officials, but like many conspiracists, he was blind to internal contradictions in his arguments.

Garrison first decided to investigate the Kennedy assassination during a plane ride in November 1966 with Senator Russell Long, the son of Huey Long, another self-proclaimed champion of the people and enemy of "the establishment." Senator Long told Garrison that the growing number of books and articles questioning the Warren Report had prompted him to have his own doubts. Garrison began to read the critics' books and devour the Warren Commission hearings. He had an excuse to reopen the case: Oswald had lived in New Orleans during the summer of 1963, but commission investigators had mostly ignored his activities there. As district attorney, Garrison could address that oversight and look for possible co-conspirators.[132]

The prosecutor began by interrogating several local residents who had contacted the FBI with leads shortly after the assassination. He was particularly interested in the tale of Dean Andrews, a New Orleans lawyer who had testified before the Warren Commission. Andrews claimed that Oswald had visited his law office a few times in the company of some "gay kids" from Mexico. On the day after Kennedy's death, Andrews said, a shadowy, bisexual figure named "Clay Bertrand" had asked him to defend Oswald.[133] The FBI had investigated Andrews's story and found it baseless; indeed, Andrews himself later admitted that he made up most of it.[134] But Garrison saw opportunity in Andrews's story, and he quickly identified "Bertrand" as a local businessman named Clay Shaw. Although Shaw did not look anything like Andrews's description of "Bertrand," his name was Clay and he was gay, which was close enough for Garrison.[135] In March 1967, Garrison made a splash on the front pages of newspapers across the country by arresting Shaw for conspiracy to murder President Kennedy.

At first, the Warren Report critics were thrilled that a public official with subpoena power was finally pursuing the case. Sylvia Meagher confessed that she had to repress her "almost irresistible" impulse to rush to New Orleans as soon as she heard Garrison intone "Let justice be done

though the heavens fall."[136] Other assassination researchers did not repress these impulses. Many of them flew to New Orleans to serve as foot soldiers in Garrison's army of justice. Edward Epstein went through Shaw's papers for the prosecutor, Harold Weisberg searched for new witnesses, and Mark Lane held press conferences to herald Garrison's new leads.[137] They all wanted to help Garrison identify the real conspirators.

But just who were these conspirators? At first, Garrison was intrigued by the homosexuality of the supposed plotters. Seventeen years after McCarthy and other anticommunist conspiracists had vilified American diplomats as "pansies," Garrison resurrected the image of the homosexual enemy. He initially toyed with the idea that these men had committed a "homosexual thrill killing" and had targeted the president because they envied his virility.[138] Quickly, though, he discarded this theory in favor of one he found more compelling. Like McCarthy, Garrison came to believe that the real traitors to the republic were lodged in the heart of the federal government itself.

Garrison was the first prominent American to propose what would ultimately become the most widely believed JFK conspiracy theory: that elements within the U.S. government—most commonly, the CIA—had killed the president because he wanted to get out of Vietnam. In fact, Garrison's conspiracy theory was similar to one set forth by Soviet intelligence, and recent research has suggested this was no coincidence. Three days after Garrison arrested Shaw, European newspapers began running stories that identified Shaw as a CIA agent. Garrison read these stories and revised his conspiracy theory. He dropped the "homosexual thrill killing" angle and began to portray Shaw as a covert operative of a shadowy group within the federal government.[139]

As Max Holland has shown, the foreign newspaper stories that inspired Garrison were actually the products of a KGB disinformation campaign. Ironically, though President Johnson had tried assiduously to deflect suspicion from the Kremlin for Kennedy's assassination, Moscow's spies had been working just as hard to focus the blame on Johnson. For years, the KGB had been planting stories in the communist press alleging that the CIA and/or President Johnson had killed Kennedy.[140] When Garrison arrested Shaw, the KGB quickly adapted its story to fit the new circumstances and fingered the New Orleans businessman as part of the secret government plot.[141] Garrison picked up the European story, embroidered it

with his own details, and announced that he was now on the trail of government-backed assassins.

In a different time—indeed, only a few months earlier—this conspiracy theory would have seemed incredible to most Americans. But Garrison, like McCarthy before him, chose the perfect moment to charge treason in high places. The month before Garrison arrested Shaw, the left-wing nagazine *Ramparts* revealed that the CIA had been secretly funneling ıundreds of thousands of dollars to a domestic organization, the National Student Association, a moderately liberal group of college student activists. Soon Americans learned that the CIA had also covertly funded numerous abor unions and cultural groups.[142] In other words, an agency prohibited y law from operating in the United States had been secretly trying to ıfluence the country's cultural, economic, and political debates. As the ditors of *Commonweal* wrote, "There is no point in complaining about a rowing attachment of the New Left to 'conspiracy theories' when genuine onspiracies are popping up all around."[143] Right at this time of heighteng skepticism of America's secret warriors, Garrison announced that Clay haw was part of a CIA conspiracy to kill the president.

Once Garrison decided that Shaw was a government operative, he began spin grand theories about the killing. It was all connected to the cold ar. Kennedy had been killed, Garrison said, "because he wanted peace." swald was actually a tool of the right; he had shrewdly been perfecting a mmunist cover since his high school days. His attempted assassination Walker had been part of his act. "If you defect to Russia, pass out prostro leaflets on street corners and take a pot shot at General Walker," rrison reasoned, "who on earth would doubt you're a Communist?"[144]

In Garrison's view, the federal government had killed Kennedy because opposed its plan to subvert American democracy and individualism. A roto-fascist" state had taken over the country, with "an arrogant, swol- bureaucratic complex totally unfettered by the checks and balances the Constitution" holding the real power. "In a very real and terrify- sense," he said, "our Government is the CIA and the Pentagon, with ngress reduced to a debating society."[145]

It was the invisible government of Charles Lindbergh again, but this e it was called the "military-industrial complex." Garrison drew on traditional American fear of hidden plotters in the government and pted it to the 1960s. His thesis was appealingly simple: Americans

could no longer trust the federal government, which lied about everything. To combat the lies, real Americans must support truth-seekers like Jim Garrison. The conspirators in the government would be exposed, and the rightful rulers—those who were still alive, anyway—would be restored to power.

This was the mirror image of General Walker's conspiracy theory. Though Earl Warren was still the chief villain, this time the plotters were fanatical *anti*communists, and the victims were the ones who wanted peace with the communists. In Garrison's view, a cabal of CIA agents, military men, and defense contractors had united to kill the man who threatened their profits; they were, indeed, the modern merchants of death. This theory appealed to a number of Warren Report critics, who agreed with Garrison that the government's lies could have catastrophic consequences. "If I was basically in favor of our foreign policy," Raymond Marcus, an early skeptic, said in 1967, "I wouldn't be doing this work. But people have believed lies and those lies are going to kill us all."[146]

Those lies are going to kill us all. Ironically, President Johnson had tried to avoid a real investigation into Kennedy's murder because he was afraid that finding the truth might lead to Armageddon. The JFK conspiracy theorists saw the government "whitewash" as evidence of its willingness to *risk*—rather than avoid—a nuclear war. In another irony, they also saw the president who had escalated the secret war against Castro as a martyr for peace.

Ultimately, Garrison favored the emerging New Left theory that the chief conspirator was the man "who has profited most from the assassination—your friendly President! Lyndon Johnson."[147] Opponents of the Vietnam War hated Johnson as much as the isolationist right had hated Franklin Roosevelt; they believed that there was no limit to his evil.

As Garrison began his crusade, popular culture started to reflect this leftist hatred of President Johnson. In February 1967, an Off Broadway theater company produced a Macbeth parody, *MacBird!*, which featured a vice president with a Texas accent conspiring with his wife, Lady MacBird, to assassinate the president, John Ken O'Dunc. Written by a twenty-five-year activist, Barbara Garson, *MacBird!* had circulated in New Left circles as an underground script but could not find a publisher until Garson's husband set up his own company, Grassy Knoll Press, to bring it to the people. It sold 100,000 copies. Two ordinary citizens with contacts in the theater, a

age designer and a secretary, worked with Garson to produce the play in ew York.[148]

Even after the play started rehearsals, the producers faced obstacles: a cal TV news station spiked a report on *MacBird!*; New York fire marshals ent four hours poking around the theater, trying to find violations to jus- y shutting down the play; and a publisher refused to print the *MacBird!* ochure because of what he regarded as its sick and irresponsible conspir- y theory. "If those people think they can make a fortune out of a national gedy," he said, "they're crazy."[149]

But they were not so crazy: the play was a hit, with "warm and respon- e" sold-out audiences persuading legitimate publishers to bid for the ht to produce slick editions of the play in English and French.[150] *MacBird!* s successful because Garson's counternarrative captured and intensified "many dark fears and suspicions that are coming to light," explained hard Christiansen of the *Chicago Daily News*. "As such," he continued, is only a sign of the general malaise eating away at the nation today, l there, at heart, is the real terror for us all."[151]

Garrison promoted himself as a hero to the fans of *MacBird!* and to swelling ranks of disaffected leftists. These one-time liberals saw the rent president as a right-wing warmonger who equated disagreement h sedition. "Flush out this filthy scum," Johnson/MacBird says in the y, "destroy dissent. It's treason to defy your president."[152] As the scholar n Kaplan noted in 1967, the leftist conspiracy theories blaming Johnson Kennedy's murder helped to "ease the frustrations of Vietnam" and to ish Johnson for his perceived sins.[153]

But Garrison's cynical opportunism soon fractured the once-united ssination research community. Some of the early critics were shocked his posturing, his wild swings from one conspiracy theory to another, his unethical methods of investigation, including hypnosis and brib- Meagher began to compare Garrison to the man most hated by assas- tion researchers: Earl Warren. "I do not see how we are to be saved," wrote a friend, "merely by replacing one set of liars and charlatans a new clique of liars, purveyors of fabricated evidence, and framers of cent (though unpopular) people."[154]

The mainstream press also began to turn against Garrison. The *rday Evening Post*, an early fan of the crusading district attorney, ished a troubling article that raised serious questions about Garrison's

ethics and evidence.[155] In the *New Yorker*, Edward Epstein compared Garrison to Senator McCarthy. The unscrupulous prosecutor, he said, followed McCarthy's example of exploiting "inchoate fears" and "organizing a popular flight from reality."[156]

While Epstein, Meagher, and other researchers decried Garrison's hijacking of their movement, other critics maintained that he was still good for the cause. Garrison's supporters called themselves the Dealey Plaza Irregulars, after the crew of street urchins who assisted Sherlock Holmes, the "Baker Street Irregulars." They continued to support their Holmes, even when he claimed that sixteen gunmen had killed Kennedy from five different directions.[157] The Assassination Inquiry Committee, one of several new groups formed in the wake of Garrison's investigation, expressed irritation with the critics who attacked the prosecutor. "FOR GOD'S SAKE, SUPPORT JIM GARRISON!" the group's newsletter exclaimed. "It seems to us that Garrison is the only public official in the United States who is actively pursuing the truth of the assassination."[158] David Lifton, a critic who recoiled from Garrison's methods, said the Garrison supporters' motto seemed to be "Rally round the plot, boys. It's not much of a plot, but it's the only plot we've got."[159]

Garrison's greatest appeal was to the far left and, ironically, the far right. Although he publicly identified himself as a leftist, he enjoyed swapping theories with right-wing conspiracists. Their villains were different—Garrison blamed the "fascists," while the right-wing activists blamed the communists—but their description of the problem was similar. In the end, one of his aides later wrote, "all were prepared to agree that the spectral 'they' who controlled the nation were inimical to left and right alike."[160]

Liberal political leaders, with their faith in Earl Warren and in the liberal state, tended to be the most critical of Garrison's investigation. Until his own assassination in 1968, Robert Kennedy opposed Garrison's inquiry and all other public attempts to reopen the investigation of his brother's death. Although Robert Kennedy became a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War, he did not believe the conspiracy theory that the military-industrial complex had killed his brother for his peaceful views. Garrison responded by charging that Kennedy was more interested in his own political career than in finding the truth.[161] After Kennedy's murder by the Palestinian terrorist Sirhan Sirhan, though, Garrison "revealed" that the dead senator had actually been one of his secret supporters. Shortly

efore his assassination, unnamed "emissaries" from Robert Kennedy had ecretly told Garrison that "there were many guns between him and the Vhite House." As a result, the senator had to remain coy about the "real ssassins" until he was in the position to punish them. Robert Kennedy new, Garrison claimed, that there was a "force" in the United States ded-ated to "disposing of any individual opposed to the Viet Nam war, our volvement in the Viet Nam war, or any sort of involvement in the cold ar."[162]

By the summer of 1968, some assassination researchers were attempt-g to decipher the plots behind "K1" and "K2," the two Kennedy assas-iations, which, they said, shared many similarities. Some conspiracists o connected the Kennedy assassinations with James Earl Ray's "alleged" ırder of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968. Sirhan, Ray, and Oswald re all puppets of much larger forces dedicated to keeping the United ıtes in Vietnam. The RFK and King assassinations never grabbed the blic imagination the way Dallas did, partly because Sirhan and Ray sur-ed their trials. But for hard-core JFK assassination researchers, the three rders formed a pattern that exposed the motive behind them all: the d to kill any leader who sought to thaw the cold war.

In 1969, after numerous delays, Garrison finally put Clay Shaw on l for conspiracy to murder John Kennedy, the only person ever to stand l for the crime. Shaw quickly became irrelevant to the case, however, Garrison did not even bother to attend court on the days of his testi-ıy.[163] Instead, the prosecutor subpoenaed the Zapruder film and showed the jury a total of fourteen times. However, he lacked any credible ence to connect the defendant with the assassination. When the trial ly ended, the jury took less than an hour to acquit him. Garrison's crit-vere relieved that he had not succeeded in framing an innocent man. prosecutor stood revealed, said the New Orleans *States-Item,* "for t he is: a man without principle who would pervert the legal process to wn ends."[164]

Garrison had a different explanation for his defeat. Until his death in , he would accuse journalists, assassination researchers, government als—indeed, everyone who challenged him—of working for the CIA. opponents found themselves in the unenviable position of having ove that they were not lying operatives of the secret state. Indeed, son made these accusations in part because he knew they were hard

to refute. According to one of his disaffected aides, Garrison had chosen to target CIA officials because "they can't afford to answer."[165]

As it turned out, the CIA did have some secrets about Clay Shaw. In 1979, when he was deposed in an unrelated lawsuit, former CIA chief Richard Helms revealed that Shaw had been an unpaid contact for the agency. Like thousands of businessmen in the early cold war, he had been debriefed by the agency's domestic contact division when he returned from foreign travels. Garrison seized on this testimony as proof for his charge that Shaw had been an "agent" of the CIA.[166]

Garrison's conspiracy theory achieved mythical status in 1991, when the filmmaker Oliver Stone made him the hero of his influential movie, *JFK*. The film confirmed most Americans' belief in a conspiracy: even before its release, only 11 percent believed that Oswald acted alone. (After the release, 10 percent believed in the lone gunman theory.)[167] Stone, like Garrison, contended that a cabal within the government had conspired to kill the president. So many Americans came to believe Garrison's theory, Max Holland has argued, that the Soviet disinformation campaign that inspired it might be "the single most effective active measure undertaken by the KGB against the United States."[168]

However, it was not just the KGB's and Garrison's lies that prepared Americans to believe in CIA conspiracy theories; it was also the lies of the U.S. government. Over the next several years, as congressional investigators dramatically revealed and documented those lies, even the most outrageous conspiracy theories about the government began to seem credible to many Americans.

EVER SINCE NOVEMBER 22, 1963, many Americans have ascribed transcendent importance to the assassination of John F. Kennedy. It was "the archetypal crime of parricide" that shook the nation to its core, according to a staff report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence.[169] The historian Christopher Lasch proclaimed it "a symbol of the country's thwarted promise, of former greatness overthrown, of the American dream in decline."[170] Many observers have concluded that it marked the beginning of the end of faith in the liberal state.

Besides their obvious distrust of government, the assassination conspiracy theories also reflect a loss of faith in all experts—in government *and* science—and in the whole idea of "expertise." When the amateur sleuths

tuffed their tape recorders in their armpits and used their hardware store ools to measure bullet angles, they were demonstrating their distrust of uthorities. After the initial attacks on the Warren Report, one assassina-ion researcher explained, experts could "no longer claim undisputed privi-eged status among the myriad forms of human discourse. Indeed experts, y any measure, have become an endangered species."[171] The amateurs in he JFK investigation were rejecting the experts' view of a world-changing istorical event. The struggle between the Warren Commission and its ritics was a struggle over who could write the nation's history.[172]

Ironically, the government itself handed the critics the primary sources hey needed to write this history. In July 1966, just as the first best-selling ritiques of the Warren Report began appearing, President Johnson signed nto law the Freedom of Information Act. "This legislation," he proclaimed, springs from one of our most essential principles: a democracy works best hen the people have all the information that the security of the Nation ermits."[173] Warren Report critics would use the FOIA to pry information om what they saw as a sinister yet clumsy government that had neglected destroy documentary evidence of its crimes.

As the amateur critics eagerly took on the challenge of writing about e Kennedy assassination, most academic historians steadfastly avoided e subject. As Max Holland has noted, historians have been quick to ana-ze and condemn Pearl Harbor conspiracy theories, but they have been luctant to take on the hundreds of books on JFK conspiracy theories.[174]

This is unfortunate, because Kennedy's death cannot be understood ithout placing it in the historical context of the cold war. The cold war plains virtually everything about the assassination: it is, as Holland has ritten, the thread that connects all parts of the Kennedy drama. "Pull that thread," Holland writes, "and primary mysteries unravel."[175] onspiracists' favorite villains—anti-Castro Cubans, Castro, Soviet lead-s, and mafia dons—were all cold war actors. Even the lone-gunman eorists must place the cold war at the heart of their explanation of the sassination, for Kennedy's Cuba policy, in the form of the Castro plots, ovides the most likely explanation of Oswald's motive.

Some analysts have concluded that Kennedy thus caused his own ath, that JFK was killed "by a political conspiracy his own actions may ve helped set in motion," as Lasch argued.[176] The progressive journalist lexander Cockburn predicted that Oswald might someday be recognized

as a dedicated leftist who put a stop to murderous U.S. policies in the only way that he could.[177]

It is unfair, however, to blame Kennedy for his own murder. The Castro plots, which were set in motion by the Eisenhower administration, were the products of much bigger cold war forces than John Kennedy alone. Above all, they were the result of the anticommunist conspiracy theory that warped U.S. politics and policy. If Kennedy officials paid a high price for their covert foreign policies, as Robert Kennedy told close friends, they did so because the anticommunist extremists had made it politically impossible for them to accept the Cuban Revolution.[178] John Kennedy, who had begun his presidency with a ringing call to Americans to pay any price in the defense of liberty throughout the world, paid a much greater price than he ever could have imagined.

The American state also paid a very great price when its leaders decided to hide the political context of the assassination. High government officials—Lyndon Johnson, J. Edgar Hoover, and Earl Warren—did in fact carry out a conspiracy, though not the one so often attributed to them. It was a conspiracy to hide the truth about U.S. policy toward Cuba, and thus to obscure the historical context and the meaning of the assassination. Through their conspiracy, these dedicated statists undermined the credibility of the state.

Soon, a new set of statists would continue this trend. The assassination researchers believed that no president could ever be worse than Johnson. But the next president would make conspiracies and conspiracy theories central to the American system of governance.