Paranoia Unbound

DEEP POLITICS AND THE DEATH OF JFK.
By Peter Dale Scott. Univ. of Calif. Press. 413 pp. $25
CASE CLOSED: Lee Harvey Oswald and the
Assassination of JFK. By Gerald Posner. Random
House. 607 pp. $25
WHO SHOT JFK?: A Guide to the Major
Conspiracy Theories. By Bob Callahan. Fireside.
159 pp. $12

It is instructive to contrast the mythology
surrounding the assassination of Presi-
dent John F. Kennedy with the public
and scholarly attitudes toward Japan’s attack
on Pearl Harbor—the other “flashbulb” event
that seared America’s collective memory. Like
the assassination of Kennedy, the surprise at-
tack was the subject of an executive branch in
testigation followed by congressional hear-
ings. As with the assassination, explanations
based on conspiracy have dogged the official
story about Pearl Harbor. (The latest accusa-
tion surfaced only three years ago.)

But distortions of the record and ques-
tionable logic have always helped relegate
Pearl Harbor conspiracy theories to the politi-
cal fringes; the official story remains intact. The
phenomena surrounding the JFK assassination
could not present a starker contrast. Here the
passage of time has only heightened public
disbelief in the official account
of the assassination, com-
monly known as the Warren
Report. After the Warren
Commission published its
findings in September 1964, a
Gallup poll indicated that 56
percent of Americans believed
the report’s main finding: that
Lee Harvey Oswald, acting
alone, was President Ken-
dedy’s assassin. Today, how-
ever, approximately 90 per-
cent of the public believes
there was some kind of con-
spicacy to kill JFK.

This figure includes some who toil in the
halls of academe. Among the plethora of new
offerings on the 30th anniversary of the assas-
sination is Deep Politics and the Death of JFK, by
Peter Dale Scott, an English professor at the
University of California at Berkeley. In one
sense, there is nothing remarkable about this
work. Indeed, its outstanding characteristics
put it squarely in the tradition of most books
about the assassination. Deep Politics is an un-
readable compendium of “may haves” and
“might haves,” non sequiturs, and McCarthy-
style innuendo, with enough documentation
to satisfy any paranoid. The assassination,
Scott writes (in typically opaque prose), was
“the product of ongoing relationships and
processes within the deep American political
process.” What is this deep process? A virtual
political Disneyland: the CIA, drug dealers,
Somoza, Fred Hampton, COINTELPRO,
Oliver North. And that’s just from two pages.

The manuscript apparently went unpub-
lished for years, and one is mightily tempted
to say that it should have remained so. As-
toundingly, though, the book won the major-
ity approval of the 20 professors, including
four historians, who served on the University
of California’s editorial committee in 1991–92.

To understand the JFK phenomenon, it
phenomenon from previous manifestations of paranoia is that the distrust is so deep and pervasive. Glancing in America is considered traceable to related to its sense of political dispossession died on November 22 of 1963. (Democrats were out of power for reasons, clearly the putes ponderance of books (450 since 1963) and articles (tens of thousands) have been written from the liberal/left perspective. Factual disputes have much less to do with this than one might think. “Catastrophe . . . is most likely to elicit the syndrome of paranoid rhetoric,” Hofstadter wrote. And putting aside venal reasons, clearly the liberal/left outpouring is related to its sense of political dispossession since 1963. (Democrats were out of power for 20 of the next 30 years.) Indeed, every wrong in America is considered traceable to the presidency that was aborted and the future that died on November 22, 1963.

Still, what is markedly different about this phenomenon from previous manifestations of paranoia is that the distrust is so deep and pervasive. Glancing through Who Shot JFK? one can find a conspiracy theory for practically every contingency and political belief: The Mafia did it; Robert Kennedy did; Jackie was upset because her husband had extramarital affairs, so she did it. The KGB, Cubans (both anti- and pro-Castro), the CIA and/or FBI, right-wing Texas oilmen, tsarist Russians, rocket scientist von Braun—and on the zany list goes. The “friendly fire” theory holds that a Secret Service agent riding in the limousine behind JFK fired the fatal shots, by accident. And apparently the latest trend among conspiracy theorists is to bash one another for believing in the wrong conspiracy.

Commentators usually ascribe the public’s paranoia to the disturbing events that followed Kennedy’s murder: Vietnam, other assassinations, Watergate, exposure of FBI and CIA abuses in the 1970s, and finally the Iran-contra scandal, all of which undermined Americans’ trust in their elected government. But a more complicated argument can be made. The assassination and its aftermath have never been firmly integrated into their place and time, largely because of Cold War exigencies. Consequently, Americans have neither fully understood nor come to grips with the past.

But the assassination is very much a part of the Cold War, an unintended consequence of U.S. policies. And once bolted down, it ceases to be unfathomable and becomes another defining post–World War II event, as much as Vietnam or the Cuban missile crisis.

In a letter to the New York Times last year, William Manchester, author of Death of a President, identified the key source of the public’s incomprehension:

To employ what may seem an odd metaphor, there is an esthetic principle here. If you put six million dead Jews on one side of a scale and on the other side put the Nazi regime—the greatest gang of criminals ever to seize control of a modern state—you have a rough balance: greatest crime, greatest criminals.
But if you put the murdered president of the United States on one side of a scale and that wretched waif Oswald on the other side, it doesn’t balance. You want to add something weightier to Oswald. It would invest the president’s death with meaning, endowing him with martyrdom. He would have died for something.

A conspiracy would, of course, do the job nicely.

Actually, though, Oswald carries more weight than Americans have dared admit to themselves. As the Warren Report showed and Gerald Posner, a former Wall Street lawyer, reiterates in Case Closed, Oswald was a highly politicized Marxist sociopath. Disappointed with Soviet-style communism, he returned to the United States in June 1962 and began to see Cuba as the purest embodiment of communist ideology, the only truly revolutionary state: In New Orleans, he started his own “Fair Play for Cuba” chapter and walked the streets with a “Viva Fidel” placard.

Oswald, who fervently read left-wing periodicals and monitored Radio Havana, was acutely aware of the depth and nature of U.S. hostility toward Cuba. In all likelihood, he believed the worst rumors of U.S. attempts to overthrow—even assassinate—Castro, information that was later kept from the Warren Commission. After leaving New Orleans, Oswald tried to obtain a visa to Cuba to enlist in the country’s defense. But the Cuban embassy failed to see him as a “friend of Cuba,” and he returned to Dallas, embittered.

A month later, Kennedy came to town. The opportunity to subject Kennedy to the same dangers plaguing Castro presented itself. As Posner writes, Oswald, who had failed at almost everything he tried, “was suddenly faced with the possibility of having a much greater impact on history.” Jack Ruby was equally emotional, violent, and opportunistic, though not political.

Because of the Cold War, the CIA and FBI did not inform the Warren Commission about the covert operations to remove Castro. Such information, the agencies reasoned, would not contradict the central conclusion and therefore could be, and was, kept secret. Consequently, the Warren Report depicted Oswald as acting upon inchoate feelings (compounded by marital troubles) but without acute political motives.

Twelve years later, however, Senator Frank Church’s select committee on intelligence revealed the extent of anti-Castro plotting and the fact that the CIA and FBI had lied by omission to another arm of government. This shattered whatever trust remained in the official story and ripped the lid off a Pandora’s box of conspiracy theories. A slightly amended version of the official story should have become the new dogma by the late 1970s: The Kennedys’ fixation with Castro had inadvertently motivated a political sociopath. Instead, the disturbing truths were again obfuscated by Cold War exigencies, and by Kennedy partisans, who tried to disavow JFK and RFK’s knowledge of the plots.

The 30th anniversary of the assassination, especially since it coincided with the end of the Cold War, should have been marked by attempts to integrate the assassination into history. Of all the offerings, Posner’s Case Closed would seem the most suitable. But though Posner exhaustively debunks every canard proposed to date about the assassination, he largely ignores the contextual history of Oswald’s act and provides little more insight than the Warren Commission did as to why Kennedy became Oswald’s target. In addition, Posner’s stamina fails him when he writes about events after 1964, and the aftermath is almost as important in understanding the assassination now as the act itself. (In his new biography, President Kennedy: Profile of Power, Richard Reeves doesn’t shrink from depicting Kennedy as a Cold Warrior, intent on overthrowing Castro. Yet he fails to draw any connections to the assassination; indeed, Oswald is not even mentioned in the book.)
So long as it lacks historical coherence, the official story will probably never be believed, and Americans will continue to ask questions based on cunningly manufactured falsehoods. To be sure, every nation is stained by its own myths, which occasionally collide with reality. But when myths are as divorced from reality as these are, they become dangerous. Americans are encouraged to feel nostalgia for a past that never was, wax dreamily about what might have been, or indulge in elaborate paranoid fantasies about their own government. Such states of mind hardly conduce to a rational consideration of America’s role in a new world.

—Max Holland, a contributing editor of the WQ and a former Wilson Center Fellow, is writing a biography of John McCloy, a member of the Warren Commission.

**OTHER TITLES**

**History**

*A HISTORY OF GOD: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.* By Karen Armstrong. Knopf. 460 pp. $27.50

Armstrong’s sweeping history of the idea of God is something of a hybrid. Parts of it read like philosophy and theology; parts might best be described as the history of human psychology. The book as a whole reflects the experiences of its author, who, she tells us, spent seven disappointing years as a Roman Catholic nun, lost her faith, left the order, and turned to the study of the history of religion. Today, she teaches at a rabbinical institute and is affiliated with the Association of Muslim Social Scientists.

Armstrong organizes her sprawling material around the simple notion that seeking God, or seeking an overarching meaning to the universe under whatever name, is just one of those things that human beings do. As many times as the monotheistic idea disappoints them or fails to accord with events, humans come back with yet another variation to bring their God into conformity with what they’ve learned. This process has given rise to an endless oscillation between conceptions such as the serenely impersonal God of Aristotle—unmoved mover at the top of the hierarchy of forms, existing in the state of divine and unregarding apatheia toward the Creation—and the personalized deity in such forms as Jesus.

Much of this is familiar, though it becomes less so once Armstrong traces the same patterns into the rationalist and mystic movements that followed the emergence of Islam. "Just as there are