

AUTOPSY OF A MODERN MYTH

Thinking Critically About the Kennedy Assassination

A case study of paranoid reasoning

Michel Jacques Gagné

PREFACE

Man is clearly made to think. It is his whole dignity and his whole merit; and his whole duty is to think as he ought.

Blaise Pascal
Pensées, XXIV, 620-146

In December 2011 I had one of those *Eureka!* moments. And just like the Greek philosopher Archimedes, mine also occurred in the bath. However, my own sudden realization had nothing to do with the density of objects in water but rather with something that happened in Dallas in 1963—or, I should say, something that happened to *me* because of what happened in Dallas a decade before I was born. This was largely due to the fact that, after many years of dogged resistance, I had finally decided to open a book that I spent a large part of my teaching career vilifying, one I had hated for nearly two decades and, truth be told, had never actually bothered to read.

The book I am speaking of, of course, is the 1964 *Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy* (better known as the *Warren Report*), an 888-page summation of the American government's official investigation into the violent death of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Having recently started to teach a course on critical thinking and how it applies to conspiracy theories, I now found myself no longer able to hate this book from a distance. And that is why, for no other reason than to be more familiar with the "lies" of my perceived enemies, I decided to take it home for my Christmas vacation.

I confess that when it came to the subject of JFK's assassination, I had until then almost exclusively consumed only those types of books, films and alternative radio programs that held a conspiracist view of the world—a worldview that largely reflected my own. These sources, produced by the likes of Mark Lane, Jim Garrison, Fletcher Prouty, Oliver Stone, Len Osanic and James Fetzer—names you will find cited throughout this book—told me that John Kennedy, an internationally-admired and peace-loving statesman determined to end the Cold War, eradicate racism and bring forth an age of peace and good will, was gunned-down by warmongering fascists lurking inside his own government, and that the fallout from this mad coup d'état had by the end of the Twentieth century metastasized into a global political cancer. As a bilingual French Canadian who grew up under the dark cloud of the Cold War and of Mutually Assured Destruction, "acid rain", wide-scale deregulation, Free Trade and the Americanization of my country's economy, media, and culture—all things that could easily be blamed on our powerful southern neighbor—it was enticing to believe that a man like John Kennedy, widely described

as a champion of international cooperation, might somehow have made the present more palatable (in both his country and mine) had he only been able to spend a few more years in office.

By the time I resolved to take on the Warren Report on my own, I had been speaking about JFK with my students, colleagues and friends for many years, often in righteous indignation and almost always as proof that on at least one occasion a conspiracy theory turned out to be true. Alas, I was soon to discover that my rock-hard conviction was founded as poorly as a wood shack built over a fault line.

I now place a large part of the blame for my lack of judgment on my personal anxieties, fueled by having grown up under the highly mediatized threat of nuclear war, from unresolved childhood feelings of helplessness, from having had limited career prospects (or so it seemed at the time), and from harbouring a growing pessimism towards the political process. All of these feelings were to a certain extent justified. The problem was that, put together, they had produced in me a general sense of estrangement from the dominant culture, feelings of alienation that made me seek out “alternative” explanations of major past and current events, narratives that I found appealing because they vindicated my insecurities and justified my impression of being a victim of history.

I pin much of the rest of the blame on filmmaker Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991), an imaginative and highly seductive conspiracy thriller on Kennedy’s murder; a murder that was perpetrated, the film alleges, by a cabal of greedy American militarists trying to take over the world. A unique and wonderfully crafted artwork, Stone’s film played quite a trick on my young and vulnerable undergraduate mind—a mind educated enough to grasp the sensational factoids of world history but also naive enough not to perceive (or care to consider) the chaotic chains of cause and effect that hide behind most catastrophic events. In contrast to the complicated and morally ambivalent texts I was required to read by my college professors, Stone’s film offered a simple, attractive and compelling explanation for the problem of evil, one that implanted and fostered in me a paranoid view of all things.

I was certainly not the first wide-eyed idealist to tumble down that rabbit hole. I am also quite certain that hundreds of thousands will follow. But unlike most of the people this book is about, I’m happy to say that I found my way out. This did not happen all of a sudden, nor by chance. A major cause of my changing mindset occurred over a decade into my teaching career. It came as a result of having to teach the basics of logic to students in a junior college, a task that, if I was to preach by example, required me to surrender my own rigid assumptions about how the world worked to the same dispassionate and careful analysis that I was asking my students to do to theirs. Simply put, I came to accept my own right to be wrong.

As a person trained in the study of history and not formal logic, I had until then focused my search for truth on the accumulation and verification of facts—namely by assessing whether or not some reported event happened the way various sources claim that they did—and not on

how historical facts, the ones that are known to be true, can be strung together arbitrarily, carelessly, or malevolently to produce a compelling story that rings true but isn't. Teaching and studying logic led me to develop a second "filter" for testing historical claims, one that helped me see more clearly that not all facts that seem true are necessarily connected, and that even the wisest historian with a commitment to Truth (with a capital T) sometimes falls prey to emotional reasoning. In other words, studying the past through a philosopher's eye taught me to better detect pseudohistory—what we can rightly call bullshit—much of which, I'm sad to say, permeates the conspiracy genre.

And that is why, to make a short story long, I wound up in a bathtub with a copy of the *Warren Report* and a life-changing paradigm shift. This little Copernican revolution hit me in two ways, or rather, with two mutually reinforcing propositions. The first of these held that historic events—especially world-shaking ones like the Kennedy assassination—are, much like quantum mechanics, more complex and chaotic when they are studied up close than any novice researcher might first assume. The second (and most important) of these two propositions held that in spite of all this—that is, once we accept the reality that history is sloppy, full of random coincidences and poorly informed choices by human free agents—complex events like the Kennedy assassination are actually quite simple to grasp, provided we do not insist on making every detail fit a tight and tidy narrative as if it were a novel or movie.

History, we are often told, is stranger than fiction. It does not follow the rules of traditional storytelling with its carefully crafted menagerie of heroes and villains, its linear narratives, its economy of time and characters, and its underlying moral lessons. To study history as if it came out of a novel will invariably lead careless researchers to connect, simplify, stereotype, demonize, exaggerate, speculate, generalize, and cleverly reimagine the people and facts that don't neatly fit with the story they *want* to believe is the truth.

To put it another way, it was the logical principle of Ockham's razor—which states that the explanation with the fewest unproven assumptions has the greatest chance of being right—that began to convince me I had been putting my trust not in a series of verified facts but in a brilliantly engineered myth that did not reflect the messy and emotionally unsatisfying jumble of causes that history is actually made of. I soon began to realize that my acceptance of certain conspiracy theories had less to do with the strength of the evidence than with what, for existential and emotional reasons, I had refused to believe—namely that JFK could be murdered for no greater reason than that a disgruntled young man decided one morning to carry his rifle to work and turn himself into someone important. This sort of story usually makes for a rather unsatisfying film script, and like millions of other believers I longed for a more meaningful story.

After considering these two propositions, I began to carefully weigh conspiracy-based arguments against those favouring a single gunman until there remained little doubt in my mind which argument offered a simpler, sufficient, non-contradictory, and easier to

comprehend account that corresponded not with all *allegedly known* facts, but with all of the *provable, necessary, and pertinent* facts of the case. After this, every JFK conspiracy theory I came across seemed to require a great deal more faith—a logic-bending, fact-ignoring, fiction-generating, neurotic type of faith—than it did to believe that a disgruntled lone Marxist named Lee Harvey Oswald shot President Kennedy from a sixth floor window using a bolt-action rifle without assistance. This was not the story I *wanted* to hear, but it was the only one I could *prove*.

My 2013 op-ed piece in the *National Post*, titled “How Oliver Stone Turned Me into a Conspiracy Theorist,” was my official *mea culpa* and an attempt to get other recovering conspiracists out and talking about the JFK assassination. It was also the seed that sprouted the germ that turned into this book. My 2017 article in *Skeptic* magazine, titled “From Camelot to Conspiracy: Memory, Myth, and the Death of JFK”, further elaborated my take on the psychology of “JFK Buffs” and the sorts of myths they produce. This book aims to equip historians of all stripes, be they accomplished academics, college students, or amateur researchers with a practical method and examples that can help them wade through the quagmire of conspiracy claims and other types of misleading information that congests Twenty First Century media. If it can keep just a few budding minds from tumbling into the paranoid rabbit hole, or better yet, help them climb out of it, this book will have served its purpose.

To conclude, I have learned in the process of writing this book—the sort of book my professors should have got me to read when I was in college—that there are three secrets to not losing your marbles when trying to answer a question like “Who shot JFK?” These are: (a) to be ready to follow sound logic and clear evidence *wherever* these lead, even at the cost of being proved wrong, (b) to engage in meaningful and respectful exchanges with those who hold a different viewpoint, especially qualified experts, and to give the benefit of the doubt to official investigations—yes, even the Warren Commission—that they did not deliberately plan to “brainwash” the public, and (c) to avoid speculating too much about what could have possibly happened beyond what the evidence and laws of logic tell us. In other words, we must learn to tolerate uncertainty regarding what’s still not known (and may never be), not because that’s what the “official” storytellers want you to believe, but because that is how one avoids crossing the mirror and getting trapped inside a shadowy realm of one’s own invention.

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A NOTE ON NOMENCLATURE

In producing a book of this genre, an author is invariably forced to refer to particular groups of persons and their ideas with terms that may not be universally accepted or appropriately defined. This text uses terms such as “conspiracist”, “conspiracy theorist” and “JFK Buff” which, while they correctly reflect my ideas, have often been used by other authors pejoratively. Although this tome does criticize conspiracy theories and those who promote them, I have had no intention of skewing the debate by resorting to personal attacks. I therefore hope that the text speaks for itself and that my readers, especially those who reject my conclusions, will not see my use of such terms as motivated by malice.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AGVA	American Guild of Variety Artists
ARRB	Assassination Records Review Board
ARVN	Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
D.A.	District Attorney
DCI	Director of Central Intelligence
DPD	Dallas Police Department
EOP	External Occipital Protuberance
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigations
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
HSCA	House Select Committee on Assassinations
IRS	Internal Revenue Service
JBS	John Birch Society
JFK	John Fitzgerald Kennedy
KGB	<i>Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti</i> (Soviet Committee for State Security)
LBJ	Lyndon Baines Johnson
LGT	Lone Gunman Theory
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration
NODA	New Orleans District Attorney
NPC	Naval Photographic Center
NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
RFK	Robert Francis Kennedy
SAIC	Special Agent In Charge (Secret Service)
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society
SBT	Single Bullet Theory
SOP	Standard Operating Procedures
TSBD	Texas School Book Depository
UNTL	University of North Texas Libraries
USAF	United States Air Force
UTAL	University of Texas at Arlington Library
USSR	Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (aka: the Soviet Union)
WC	Warren Commission

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