ASSASSINATIONS AND THE DEATH OF PRESIDENT KENNEDY

CASE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

An assassin is a murderer. The term assassination is normally used when referring to the act of killing a powerful or famous person. Assassinations and assassins are as old as human history. In ancient history there are stories about the murder of all kinds of prominent people, kings, queens, tyrants, soldiers and politicians. Ancient writers, in fact, often argued that it was acceptable to murder a bad ruler. In more recent times the deaths of American presidents like Abraham Lincoln in 1865 and John F. Kennedy in 1963 have become well known and the subject of many books and films. One of the key events leading to World War I was the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914. Sometimes we look back on assassinations and assassins and think of them as evil; on other occasions we might decide that the killers had good reason for what they did.

Assassins have acted for a variety of reasons, sometimes personal, and at other times motivated by racial hatred or issues linked to politics or religion. This brings us to the important question: can assassination be justified?
ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST POLITICAL ASSASSINATION AND TERRORISM

For

- Some people, governments and cultures are so bad, such as Nazi Germany and Hitler, that any kind of violence against them is proper.
- The world could be made a better place by getting rid of the truly evil governments and rulers.
- Some governments and leaders use violence against their own people. The people therefore should be allowed to use violence against their rulers.
- Murder is not generally a good thing, but sometimes the death of one really bad person or the defeat of an evil system of government might make life better for lots of others.

Against

- Assassins and terrorists put their ideas and values above human life. They need to try to find other ways to fight for their cause.
- You can’t say that a government or ruler who uses violence against their people is wrong if you behave in exactly the same way. Two wrongs can never make a right.
- How do you decide if a government or a ruler is bad enough to resort to violence? Who has the right to make that kind of life-and-death decision?
- If you say that assassination and terrorism are acceptable, how do you separate them from other kinds of murder? If murder is wrong, assassination and terrorism that leads to the deaths of innocent people must be wrong.

BACKGROUND

The word ‘assassin’ comes from the Arabic word hashshashin, meaning those who use hashish. Around 1000–1100 a religious sect in the Middle East employed agents to murder their enemies. These agents carried out their tasks under the influence of drugs. As noted above, in the past, assassins have had all kinds of motives. Some assassinations are planned and carried out by groups of people. These are called conspiracies. Many of the best known assassinations have been the work of conspiracies. A small group of Romans plotted the death of Julius Caesar, while President Lincoln, Tzar Alexander II of Russia, Franz Ferdinand and Adolf Hitler were all the victims of group plots. On other occasions assassins have acted alone and killed famous people for strictly personal reasons. Personal motives can include the entire range of human feeling, hate, jealousy, revenge, passion or just the desire to become famous. It is not surprising therefore that some assassins, like some murderers, have been mentally unstable. For example:

- On 2 July 1881 Charles J. Guiteau shot and killed US President James Garfield. Guiteau said that he heard voices and that God had told him to kill the president.

- In South Africa on 6 September 1966 Demitrios Tsafendas stabbed to death the Prime Minister Dr Hendrik Verwoerd. Tsafendas hated all doctors. He believed that a giant tape worm was eating him up from the inside. None of the doctors he saw could find anything wrong with him. Tsafendas was certain that they were all plotting against him and just waiting for the tape worm to kill him. Verwoerd was widely known throughout the country simply as the ‘doctor’. Therefore when Tsafendas, who was a messenger in the parliament, stabbed the prime minister as he sat at his desk,
it wasn’t because he was the national leader or in protest against South Africa’s racial policies; it was because Tsafendas hated all doctors. The assassin was declared insane and sentenced to an asylum, still complaining that no one would help him get rid of his tape worm.

- **Beatle John Lennon was one of the best known people in the world.** On 8 December 1980 he was murdered as he left his apartment in New York. The assassin was Mark Chapman, a young man who had decided to kill someone famous as a protest against what he saw as all the phoney in the world. Chapman was also a great admirer of the American writer J.D. Salinger. Chapman said after his capture that the publicity from the murder of Lennon and stories about the fact that the assassin had read Salinger’s books, especially Catcher in the Rye would encourage other people to read the book. The moment before he pulled the trigger Chapman said he heard a voice saying, ‘do it, do it.’ At first Chapman claimed that he was not guilty because of insanity, but soon after he changed his plea to guilty. He was sentenced to life in prison. In 1982 he wrote a letter to Lennon’s wife, Yoko Ono, saying that he was sorry.

**TASK**

Do these lone assassins have anything in common?

Go back over the stories of the assassins above and use the internet to conduct further research of your own. Look closely at the personalities of the assassins. Are there any personality traits they share?

What you are doing is called a ‘personality profile’. Police use methods like this to help them find murderers, lone assassins and serial killers. This is one way in which the ‘historical method’, that is, looking at the past and learning from it, can be very useful.

**THE PUNISHMENT OF AN ASSASSIN**

Assassins often die for what they believe in. If anyone wants to murder an important person there are almost always major risks. Famous people tend to be well guarded (although not always). There is therefore a very real danger that the assassin will be caught or killed in the attempt. In the past, the penalties for anyone plotting against royalty have been especially harsh.

In 1584 Balthasar Gerard, a French Catholic, was the first assassin to use a handgun to kill a head of state. Gerard shot William of Orange, the Protestant ruler of the Netherlands. Following his capture Gerard was severely punished over four days. On the first day he was taken to the local market place and was tortured by having his arms tied behind his back then hoisted off the ground by a rope thrown over a beam. Gerard was subsequently dropped from a height of about three metres. The rope was, however, tied off so that he never actually hit the ground. This particular form of torture was known as ‘strappado’ and the process was repeated until the victim’s shoulders were dislocated. On the second day Gerard was lashed and most of the skin flayed from his back. Salt was then rubbed in to the raw wounds. After this his right hand was cut off. On the third day chunks of flesh the size of an adult hand were hacked from Gerard’s chest and the wounds were again salted. He then had his left hand cut off. On the fourth day things got worse. Gerard was tied naked to two stakes so that he could not sit or move. A large fire was built close by and two men used it to heat red hot metal pincers. The pincers were then used to repeatedly nip chunks of flesh from Gerard’s body. Finally, ensuring that the victim was conscious, Gerard was taken down and laid on the ground. His stomach was carefully cut open and his intestines slowly removed, they were then burned in front of him. The final act of the four-day execution saw Gerard’s body then cut into quarters. Reports from the time indicated that throughout Gerard abused his tormentors and repeated that he rejoiced that he had killed their ruler.
THE ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT JOHN KENNEDY

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was one of the youngest and most popular men ever to be president of the United States. Writers have described Kennedy as ‘charismatic’. This meant that due to his appearance, personality and speeches, people came to admire and support him. Kennedy was born into a very wealthy family and his early political career was dominated by the money and ambitions of his father Joseph Kennedy. At the time of his death historians, including William Manchester, suggested that Kennedy was one of the great American presidents. This opinion has not stood the test of time. Historians still argue about John F. Kennedy, but few would suggest that he deserved to be ranked with the greatest of US presidents.

In the long history of assassinations the murder of John Kennedy is one of the most famous and controversial. People talk about how they can remember where they were when they heard the news about the shooting. The assassination is also famous because the president’s death was recorded on film by Abraham Zapruder and because the man who was charged with shooting Kennedy, Lee Harvey Oswald, was himself gunned down in front of a television audience. Immediately after Kennedy’s death, the new president, Lyndon Johnson, set up a special investigation into the assassination. Called the Warren Commission, it was headed by the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court, Earl Warren. The commission found that Lee Harvey Oswald had acted alone and that he had been solely responsible for the president’s death. Rather than clearing up the details of Kennedy’s death, the Warren Commission only added to the mystery and controversy. There have been hundreds of books, many television
documentaries and several films dealing with the Warren Commission and the events surrounding the president’s death, few of them have anything good to say about the findings of the commission. The chief failure of the Warren Commission appears to have been that it decided in advance that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin and then set about trying to make all the evidence fit that conclusion. This is an excellent example of what not to do. Historians, or anyone involved in a search for the truth need to keep an open mind. Let the evidence lead you to the answer, do not try and make the facts fit a predetermined answer.

Between 1976 and 1979 the US Congress reopened the investigation into Kennedy’s death. After a detailed examination of all of the evidence the House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations concluded that Kennedy’s death had probably been the result of a conspiracy and that there was enough scientific evidence to suggest that had been at least two gunmen in Dealey Plaza.

THE ‘MAGIC BULLET’

One of the main causes for complaint about the Warren Commission’s finding was the claim that a single bullet had passed through Kennedy’s body, hit Governor Connally, exited the front of his chest, and smashed his right wrist before ending up in the governor’s thigh. This bullet then fell from Connally’s thigh and was found on a stretcher in Parkland Hospital. When examined this bullet was in near perfect condition and showed none of the kinds of damage that might have been expected. Tests were done with similar bullets, firing them into paper wadding and through the bodies of dead goats. All of the bullets from these tests were bent badly out of shape, while the bullet that wounded both Kennedy and Connally displayed little damage. The ‘magic bullet’ also got its name because, if it did the things that the Warren Commission claimed, it would have had to alter direction dramatically in flight. It entered Kennedy’s body on a downward path, striking him in the upper back about 15 cm. below the point it exited the front of his throat. In other words, after it hit Kennedy it stopped travelling downwards and angled up. Critics of the Warren Commission also claim that the bullet had to turn to the right after leaving Kennedy’s throat if it was going to hit Connally where it did.

**Figure 4.2** The necessary path of a single bullet, based on Kennedy’s and Connally’s wounds.

**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What does the word ‘charismatic’ mean? List two other leaders in modern history who you think were successful because of their personalities.
2. Why is the Kennedy assassination so famous?
3. What was wrong with the Warren Commission’s approach to the investigation?
4. Why do critics of the Warren Commission talk about a ‘magic bullet’? Why did it get its name?
THE EVENTS IN DALLAS ON 22 NOVEMBER 1963

As the motorcade carrying President Kennedy passed through Dealey Plaza in the centre of Dallas travelling from Love Field, the local airport, to a luncheon at a convention centre, the Trade Mart, a number of shots were fired. Kennedy was hit at least twice. The first bullet appeared to strike him high in the back. (The Warren Commission maintained the Kennedy was struck in the lower neck). This wound was serious but did not kill him. Seconds later the president was hit by another bullet, which blew his skull apart. Bits of the president’s brain were found in the car and on the uniform of one of the escorting motorcycle policemen. Jacqueline Kennedy had been sitting next to her husband. She had turned to try and help him after he was first hit. After the second shot she appeared to climb out of the back of the car, before she was pushed back in by a secret service agent. Some people suggest that she was trying to get help; others think that she was afraid that she would get shot next and that as a result

Figure 4.3 A still photograph from frame 312 of the Zapruder film. Kennedy has been hit and is leaning forward to his left. Governor Connally has also been shot and has fallen back towards his wife.

Figure 4.4 Frame 321 from the Zapruder film. The President falls back and to his left in response to the fatal head shot.
Mrs Kennedy was running away in fright; others point out that she might have been attempting to recover a fragment of her husband’s skull that was lying on the boot of the car behind the president’s seat. During the frantic ride to Parkland Hospital Mrs Kennedy nursed her husband’s shattered head in her lap. A vivid memory of that day for many people was the sight of Jacqueline Kennedy in her bloodstained pink suit. Hours later, after the president had been declared dead, she refused to change her outfit. Mrs Kennedy said that she wanted people to see what had been done to her husband. The Governor of Texas, John Connally, who was riding in the same car as the president and Mrs Kennedy, was also shot. The governor, however, recovered from his wounds.

Members of the large crowd who had gathered to see the president and his wife panicked. Some fell to the ground fearing that they would be shot; others began to run. The shots had echoed around the Plaza and people couldn’t be sure how many shots were fired or from where. Local Dallas police were just as confused. Some ran with part of the crowd towards a small hill that had been in front and to the right of the president’s car, called the grassy knoll; others ran into the Texas School Book Depository near the motorcade.

**TASK**

Below are some of the many eyewitness accounts of the assassination. Read each of them carefully and summarise in point form what they have to say. Then take note of where the accounts agree and disagree.

**Account One:** From Ken O’Donnell, one of John Kennedy’s aides riding in the car behind the president.

‘We heard shots, two close together and then a third one. There must have been an interval of at least five seconds before the third and last shot because, after the second shot Dave [Dave Powers another presidential aide riding with O’Donnell] said to me, “Kenny, I think the president’s been shot”’. Powers explained that the president had slumped over towards Mrs Kennedy and was holding his throat.

O’Donnell then said that as he stared at the president, a third shot took the side of his head off. He saw pieces of bone and brain tissue and bits of President Kennedy’s reddish hair flying through the air. According to O’Donnell the impact of the shot lifted the president and shook him limply, as if he was a rag doll, and then JFK dropped out of our sight, sprawled across the back seat of the car. O’Donnell was then certain that the president was dead.

O’Donnell thought that all of the shots came from behind and to his right, in other words from the area of the Texas School Book Depository.

**Account Two:** From W. E. Newman, who was standing with his wife and two children near the road on the grassy knoll.

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*Figure 4.5* Dealey Plaza, Dallas. Note the route taken by the motorcade. Oswald’s best opportunity to shoot the president was as the motorcade approached the Texas School Book Depository (A) on Houston Street (B) —not on Elm Street (C).
Newman said that he was looking directly at Kennedy when he was hit in the side of the head. Newman then fell to the ground because he was convinced that he and his family were in the direct path of fire.

Newman thought that the shot that hit Kennedy in the head had come from what he described as the garden directly behind him, in other words from the grassy knoll, to the front and right of the president’s car.

**Account Three:** From Jean Hill, who was standing on the opposite side of the street to Newman, facing the grassy knoll.

Mrs Hill said there were from four to six shots. The first three came—one right after the other, followed by a distinct pause. She testified that they were fired rapidly and that she thought that all of the shots came from the grassy knoll, in front of the president’s car and opposite where she was standing.

**Account Four:** From Bobby Hargis, a policeman who was riding his motorcycle behind the president’s car.

Hargis gave evidence that at the time it sounded like the shots were right next to him. He sensed that the shots probably could have been coming from the railroad overpass (directly in front of the car), perhaps because Hargis was spattered with blood.

**Account Five:** From Howard Brennan, who was on the grass near the corner of Houston and Elm streets, opposite the Texas School Book Depository.

Brennan said that he heard what he thought was a backfire. It ran through his mind that it might have been someone throwing firecrackers out of the window of the red brick Texas School Book Depository Building. Brennan said that he then looked up at the building. Brennan gave evidence that he saw a man in a window of the building taking aim with a high-powered rifle.
Brennan thought that he could see the entire barrel of the gun and said he was looking at the man in this window at the time the last shot was fired.

**Account Six:** From Harold Norman, who was watching the motorcade from the fifth floor of the book depository.

Norman said that the shots came from the floor above him, the sixth floor, directly above his head. Harold Norman testified that he had heard the empty shells fall after they were ejected from the weapon as they fell on the wooden floor above him.

**Account Seven:** From Carolyn Walther, who was standing near the book depository.

Walther claimed to see at least two people on the sixth floor of the depository.

As historians we need to take all the pieces of evidence into account. We can’t just ignore some and use the ones that fit our predetermined theory.

It is also very important to remember that first-hand accounts of this kind are not always accurate. People are taken by surprise and sometimes they are in shock at what they have seen. In addition a gunshot can make three separate sounds:

1. *The muzzle blast, as the gun is fired*
2. *The shock wave, as the bullet travels through the air*
3. *The impact, as the bullet hits its target.*

Which sound or how many of these sounds these witnesses might have heard depends upon where they were standing. It was therefore possible for them to be confused about how many shots were fired. The fact that bullets travel faster than the speed of sound also means that witnesses could become confused about where the shots originated.

Of all the witnesses in Dealey Plaza on the morning of the assassination, a significant majority claimed that at least some of the shots came from the grassy knoll. Some even said that they saw men with guns behind the fence on the knoll. In fact one Dallas policeman, Joe Smith, ran into the car park behind the grassy knoll and said that he could smell gunpowder. Officer Smith had his gun drawn. He saw a man near one of the cars in the car park and held him at gunpoint. The man produced identification and when he claimed that he was a secret service agent (one of the people meant to protect the president), Officer Smith let the stranger go. Later it was discovered that according to the official records there were no secret service agents anywhere near the grassy knoll.

**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Using all the information presented to you, how reliable and useful are these sources to historians studying President Kennedy’s assassination? In your answer think about the following points.
2. Is there any reason that we know of for these people to lie?
3. Were they in a good position to see and/or hear what happened?
4. Do the facts, as we know them, back up what the witnesses have said?
5. Is there any reason why some of the witnesses might have been distracted or confused?
LEE HARVEY OSWALD

Lee Harvey Oswald was the man charged with the murder of John Kennedy. Oswald worked in the Texas School Book Depository. He was seen carrying a long parcel to work on the morning of the 22 November; he said that it contained curtain rods. The authorities discovered that he had ordered by mail the rifle found on the sixth floor of the book depository. Oswald’s palm print and some fingerprints were found on the boxes that had been placed near the sixth floor window to hide the assassin and as a rest for the rifle.

Oswald was not arrested for the president’s assassination. In fact he had been captured by the Dallas Police because he was a suspect in the murder of a local policeman, Officer J. D. Tippit. At no stage did Lee Harvey Oswald admit that he was responsible for the president’s death. Oswald claimed that he was somehow set up; that he was, in his own words a ‘patsy’. Policemen talking to Oswald noted that he seemed to be intelligent and remarkably calm. Later investigation revealed that he had fired shots at General Edwin Walker some months earlier.

If Oswald did have anything to tell us about the assassination, he never got the chance. On the morning of 24 November, as he was being moved from the Dallas police headquarters, Oswald was shot and killed by Jack Ruby, a local nightclub owner. Ruby had been hanging around the police station since Oswald’s arrest. Jack Ruby said that he shot Oswald because he wanted to save Mrs Kennedy the grief of a trial and that he had admired President Kennedy because ‘he had class’.

Figure 4.8  Lee Harvey Oswald, flanked by two Dallas police officers, was shot by Jack Ruby. Historians later discovered that Ruby had links to organised crime; the Mafia was one of the groups with a motive for killing Kennedy.
Oswald’s murder deepened the mystery. There has been a growing body of evidence to indicate that Jack Ruby had links to the Mafia and major crime bosses. There are people who claim to have seen Oswald and Ruby together before the assassination. Others suggested that someone who looked very like Ruby was near Dealey Plaza at the time Kennedy was shot. Jack Ruby died in prison from cancer and never added any information that might have cleared up the uncertainty.

Oswald does not appear to have been a ‘nut’ as Gerald Ford, a member of the Warren Commission and a man who would later become US president, suggested. Oswald had enlisted in the Marine Corps as a teenager. Later he was involved in some top-secret intelligence operations. In 1959 Oswald had defected to the Soviet Union. He lived in Russia and took a Russian wife. Although he claimed to be a communist, Oswald grew unhappy with life in the Soviet Union and returned to the United States, bringing his wife Marina with him. Many writers view all of this with suspicion, claiming that all of this indicated that Oswald had contacts with people in high government positions. They point out that it wasn’t easy to move so freely between the United States and the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War and that it was even harder for Soviet citizens like Marina to get permission to leave their country.

Oswald became politically active after he returned to the US. He supported the pro-communist government of Fidel Castro in Cuba and was seen handing out pro-Castro leaflets in New Orleans before moving to Dallas.

A REVIEW OF SOME OF THE THEORIES ON KENNEDY’S ASSASSINATION

1 ANTHONY SUMMERS THE KENNEDY CONSPIRACY (1980)

Anthony Summers based his book on the findings in 1979 of the US House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations. Summers argued that both the Mafia and the US government’s Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) were involved in the conspiracy. He established that there were clear links between Oswald and the CIA and that there were links between Jack Ruby and the Mafia. According to Summers both the CIA and the Mafia were unhappy with President Kennedy’s attitude to Cuba.

Before Fidel Castro made Cuba communist, the Mafia had made a great deal of money out of the gambling and drug trade operating from the island. They wanted to see Castro thrown out so they could resume their activities in Cuba. Very early in Kennedy’s time in power there had been a military operation planned secretly by the CIA to take power from Castro by using American weapons and Cubans trained by the CIA. This was known as the ‘Bay of Pigs’ invasion. It failed, and when it failed some people in both the CIA and the Mafia blamed Kennedy for not sending in US troops to destroy Castro. Summers argued that a desire to have a stronger man like Lyndon Johnson as president encouraged the CIA to help with the assassination.

Around the time that John Kennedy was shot his younger brother Robert Kennedy, who was attorney-general, was waging a major war on organised crime. Robert Kennedy’s activities had also begun to hurt the Mafia’s operations; therefore, according to Summers, the Mafia had extra reasons to want John Kennedy dead. Once the president was no longer around Robert Kennedy would not have the power to bother them. It was also well known that Lyndon Johnson, the man who would become president following JFK’s death, hated Robert Kennedy and would replace him as soon as possible.

Summers argues how unlikely it was that the ‘magic bullet’ could have done the things the Warren Commission claimed. He also wrote that the Zapruder film shows that Oswald didn’t have time to fire the three shots that the Warren Commission claims were fired.

Summers’ case is a strong one. He begins with the weaknesses that are obvious in the Warren Commission’s approach, uses the research of the House of Representatives Select Committee on
Assassinations and then adds his own ideas about the possible reasons why the CIA and the Mafia might have been involved.

The key weakness in Summers’ version is that it remains a theory. He raises many questions and guesses at the answers, but we don’t have proof.

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<td>1 What was the basis of Summers’ ideas about a conspiracy?</td>
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<td>2 What reasons did Summers give for the CIA and the Mafia wanting Kennedy dead?</td>
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<td>3 Research and find out a little more about the Mafia and the CIA and the ‘Bay of Pigs’ invasion.</td>
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2 DAVID LIFTON BEST EVIDENCE (1980)

David Lifton also argued that there was a conspiracy to kill the president. Unlike Summers, however, Lifton focused most of his attention on what happened after Kennedy was shot. Lifton maintained that when the president’s body was taken from Parkland Hospital in Dallas back to Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland, near Washington DC, it was operated on to hide evidence that the president had been shot from the front. According to Lifton the decision to move the body was illegal and that the findings of the official US government autopsy directly contradicted the testimony of the doctors who saw Kennedy at Parkland Hospital. He pointed to differences between X-rays taken of Kennedy’s skull and autopsy photos. The X-rays show a large area of the front right hand side of the president’s head missing, but in the photos that part of the skull is undamaged. Furthermore, vital evidence in the form of Kennedy’s brain is missing. Lifton also noted that Kennedy left Dallas in one coffin and arrived at Bethesda in a different type of coffin. He suggested that something happened to the coffin and the body after it left Dallas and before it arrived at Bethesda. For Lifton this amounts to evidence of a cover-up at the highest levels of government. He claimed that it established a case for someone at the top in the government being involved in the assassination, the cover-up, or both.

The difficulty for this version is the very complex medical evidence involved. There are ‘experts’ who agree with Lifton and say that Kennedy’s body was operated on to hide evidence, while at the same time there are other ‘experts’ who say that the facts don’t support such a view and there is clear evidence that the president was shot both times from behind.

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<tr>
<td>1 According to Lifton, what did the official autopsy try to hide?</td>
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<td>2 What are the main problems with Lifton’s version?</td>
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These three books are grouped together because they all argue that Kennedy’s death was the result of a conspiracy involving the CIA. In each case the motive was President Kennedy’s attitude to the CIA. There is evidence to indicate that the president was not happy with the performance of the CIA, that he felt that it had gained too much power and that he intended to break up the organisation. This
point of view formed the basis for Oliver Stone's film JFK starring Kevin Costner. According to Jim Marrs, Kennedy was preparing to start an American withdrawal from the Vietnam War. This aroused opposition from both the CIA and the US military; they felt that Kennedy was too soft on communism. Marrs wrote that just after Kennedy’s death the new president Lyndon Johnson ended any idea of pulling American troops out of Vietnam and ordered even more soldiers into the War.

All three books say that the Warren Commission was just a cover-up and that the physical evidence of Kennedy's wounds and the eyewitnesses all point to a number of assassins in Dealey Plaza. They all raise the issue of the ‘magic bullet’ and the time factor linked to the Zapruder film.

Claims that the CIA was involved are still a theory, or an idea of what might have happened, but not fact. There are also questions arising from the argument between ‘experts’ from all sides about the events linked to the shooting of the president. For example:

- **Were there three shots or more?**
- **Was there one gunman or more?**
- **Was Kennedy shot from the front or from behind?**

The answer to these questions depends on which ‘expert’ you listen to. The third weakness concerns the idea that Kennedy was about the pull US troops out of Vietnam. It is a fact that he had issued an order to begin withdrawals, but this order may have been just a threat. Kennedy let it be known to his advisers that he was not happy with the leaders of South Vietnam and that he hoped by bluffing that he was going to withdraw; he would force the South Vietnamese to change their leadership. In other words, he didn't really plan to take the US out of the Vietnam War after all. If this was the case the CIA and the military would not have a motive to kill him.

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**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. According to this version, who had Kennedy killed and why?
2. What are the three weaknesses with this version?

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4  **BONNAR MENNINGER MORTAL ERROR (1992)**

Menninger claimed that there was no conspiracy to kill Kennedy, but that his death was just a terrible accident. According the Menninger’s version Lee Harvey Oswald was in the Texas School Book Depository and he did shoot at the president, but Oswald only wounded him. The fatal bullet that blew open Kennedy's skull was fired by accident by one of his own Secret Service Agents riding in the car behind. Menninger produced photos of the Secret Serviceman holding a high powered rifle. After Oswald started shooting, one of them picked up an AR-15 assault rifle that they carried on the floor of their car. However the agent was off balance and as the cars sped away from the scene his rifle accidentally went off, hitting the president. Menninger produces evidence from his ‘experts’, who claim that the bullets that hit President Kennedy all came from the back. He also quotes a conversation that took place between the president’s brother, Robert Kennedy and secret service agent Clint Hill. Robert Kennedy had phoned Parkland Hospital to find out about his brother’s condition. When he asked about the president, Agent Hill said that there had been a terrible accident.

Menninger has claimed that if there has been a cover-up over Kennedy’s death, it has been to hide the embarrassing truth that the president of the United States was killed by his own bodyguards.
Like all the theories that attempt to explain what happened in Dallas, Menninger’s version has weaknesses. A lot of it is guesswork, taking bits of evidence and trying to fit them all together. Perhaps the greatest weakness is the fact that after more than thirty years no one has any real reasons to hide the facts. If Kennedy was killed by accident, the truth could come out now. In addition, there were a lot of people not linked to the secret service who would surely have noted the AR-15 being fired, but not one eyewitness account mentions anything about shots coming from anywhere near the secret service cars.

**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. In Menninger’s version, who killed Kennedy?
2. What evidence does Menninger give to support his opinion?
3. What are the weaknesses with this version?

**5 DR CHARLES A. Crenshaw JFK CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE (1992)**

Doctor Crenshaw was a member of the medical team at Parkland Hospital. Crenshaw is convinced that the wounds to President Kennedy’s head were the result of gunshots from the front and he thinks that the official autopsy report and photos were faked. Crenshaw also refers to a phone call that he received from Lyndon Johnson after Oswald had been shot. According to the doctor, Johnson insisted that a secret service agent be present in the operating theatre with Oswald because the government was keen to get a confession from Oswald about the assassination. Dr Crenshaw thought that it was unusual that the new president should take the time and trouble to make a personal phone call of this kind.

The key problem with this version is that Dr Crenshaw might be a good doctor but it does not make him an expert on gunshot wounds and points of entry and exit. He knows what he saw but that does not mean that he made the right interpretation. The large wound in Kennedy’s skull could still have
been an exit wound. In addition Crenshaw waited a very long time before publishing his version. If he was so convinced that something was wrong with the official verdict why didn’t he make his opinion public much earlier?

Figure 4.10  Dr Crenshaw, Dr McClelland and Dr Peters—three of the doctors who attended Kennedy at Parkland Hospital, giving evidence to the House Committee on Assassinations—were all agreed about there being a major wound at the back of the president’s head. How and why do these eyewitness accounts differ from the photographic evidence?

REVIEWS QUESTIONS

1. Who is Doctor Crenshaw?
2. Why are his comments important?
3. How reliable and useful is his version?

   When answering Question 3, think about:
   - The doctor’s qualifications
   - Does he have a reason to lie?
   - Could he have been influenced by any of the earlier books written about the assassination?
   - What parts of Crenshaw’s version agrees with other evidence we already have?


These two books are the best defences written of the Warren Commission’s version of the assassination, supporting the view that Lee Harvey Oswald, alone, killed Kennedy. They review all of the eyewitness accounts and note how stories changed and that many of the witnesses were confused. In the most recent book about the Kennedy assassination, Bugliosi offers an exhaustive investigation of more than 1500 pages, where he addresses and challenges each of the main conspiracy theories. Bugliosi claims that there is no physical evidence for a second gunman. We only have physical evidence in the form of bullets that were fired from Oswald’s rifle. Bugliosi adds that the nature and shape of the linear or elliptical wound in Governor Connally’s back is best explained by the idea that the bullet had been shifted off-line by hitting Kennedy.
According to Posner, Oswald had a record of political violence. He points out that Oswald attempted to assassinate General Edwin Walker because he opposed the general’s political ideas. Even though Bugliosi claimed that the Zapruder film is overrated as evidence, both Posner and Bugliosi reviewed the film and argued that it was possible for Oswald to have fired all of the shots in the time available. They point out that the doubts about Oswald being the assassin can be explained. First, the Warren Commission was wrong when it said that Oswald’s first shot hit Kennedy. Posner said that the first shot missed but claimed that there was time for Oswald to fire the second and then fatal third shots. Posner suggested that there is nothing wrong with the idea that one bullet (the so-called ‘magic bullet’) could have passed through both Kennedy and Connally. He pointed out that the bullets Oswald used were metal jacketed. That meant that they were designed to pass easily through the human body. Posner added that there is plenty of evidence for bullets altering direction in flight, especially after they have hit something. He said that it is not unusual for bullets to ‘yaw’ (move around in flight). As for the tests done on similar bullets where they all came out badly damaged, Posner claimed that the bullets in all of these tests were travelling too fast, at maximum speed, because they had been fired into wadding or dead goats at close range. By contrast the bullet that hit Kennedy and Connally had been slowed gradually, first by the branches of the tree that partly blocked Oswald’s view and second by passing through the bodies of both men. Therefore, the impact on the bullet was not as great; hence less damage. Posner added that if the bullet had hit one of the small branches that would have started its irregular movement and added to the yawing affect. Finally Posner rejects the claim that the ‘magic bullet’ was in near perfect condition as some writers suggest. He says that there is clear evidence that the bullet is slightly out of shape and that some lead can be seen to have been squeezed out of the end of the bullet.

Posner and Bugliosi defend the Warren Commission better than the Warren Commission defended itself. They offer reasonable explanations to many of the questions raised by those who argue that there was a conspiracy. The dispute, however, continues between their views of the physical evidence and those offered by the conspiracy theorists.

In terms of weaknesses, Posner prefers to focus his attention on Oswald and Ruby and spends less time dealing with the charges made by Summers, Lifton and others about the different groups that had reasons to want Kennedy dead. Bugliosi was part of a well-known television simulation called The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald where he fulfilled the role of the prosecution. Bugliosi became famous as a Los Angeles district attorney. Therefore you have to consider whether his account reflects his background as a lawyer and prosecutor where, in an adversarial system, he is accustomed to arguing for one side. This is in contrast to the approach of the historian who is encouraged to examine all sides.

**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. According to Bugliosi, what is the significance of the wound in Governor Connally’s back?
2. According to Posner, what are metal jacketed bullets meant to do?
3. How does Posner explain the lack of damage to the ‘magic bullet’?
4. How does Posner explain the ‘magic bullet’ moving around as it did?
5. What are the weaknesses in Posner’s version?
6. What motives might Bugliosi have for arguing that the Zapruder film was overrated as evidence?
7. Why might there be a reason to question Bugliosi’s approach?
ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST THE WARREN COMMISSION

For the official version

- There is a weapon, the Mannlicher-Carcano rifle used in the assassination. The bullets from this rifle match the one found on Connally’s stretcher in Parkland Hospital.
- There is a suspect. Oswald was in the book depository. His palm print was on the rifle. Oswald ordered the gun by mail order. Oswald was seen carrying a long parcel into the Depository on the morning of the assassination.
- There are ‘experts’ who claim that it was possible for Oswald to have fired all three shots in the time available and that the so called ‘magic bullet’ could have been responsible for all the wounds to Kennedy and Connally.
- Witnesses claim to have seen a man on the sixth floor of the Depository when Kennedy was shot. Other witnesses on the fifth floor say they heard empty shell cases fall on the floor above their heads.
- Oswald tried to shoot General Walker months before the Kennedy assassination; he was a violent person.
- All of these are facts. The people who disagree with the Warren Commission have not presented a weapon or a suspect. All they have is guesswork and theories.
- The Warren Commission might have made some mistakes; it might have made up its mind too quickly, but that does not mean that it got the answer wrong. Oswald was the assassin.
- All that the opponents of the Warren Commission have been able to do is ask questions and raise doubts; they have not been able to come up with proof that Oswald was not guilty.

Against the official version

- In 1979 the American Congress, through its committee investigating Kennedy’s assassination, reported that it thought that the Warren Commission was wrong.
- There have been far too many aspects of the assassination that needed to be looked into; far too many things ignored or covered up by the Warren Commission.
- Most of the eyewitnesses in Dealey Plaza on the day of the shooting claim that shots were fired from the grassy knoll. The House Committee on Assassinations said that there was scientific evidence to support the presence on a second gunman.
- Many ‘experts’ claim that Oswald didn’t have time to fire all the shots, and that the sudden changes of direction from the ‘magic bullet’ were impossible.
- The doctors who first treated Kennedy at Parkland Hospital said that he had been shot from the front.
- There are claims that Kennedy’s body was operated on after his death to hide evidence of a gunshot wound from the front.
- Oswald insisted that he was innocent, and that he had been set up.
- Oswald had links to the FBI and the CIA. Jack Ruby had links with the Mafia.
- The official version claims that it has facts, and that opponents only have theories. But there are records being kept secret until 2029. What do they have to hide?
CONCLUSION

Two important ideas emerge when studying the people and the events that surround assassination:

- Whether terrorism, assassination, political murder can be justified.
- The fact that modern history, like the people who make it, is interesting and sometimes complex. We don’t always have easy answers. One of the skills of history is being able to look at the evidence and make up your own mind.

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