

OSWALD'S TALE

(Ostensibly a Book Review)

by Dan Armstrong

“If we obtain nothing else, we can count on gaining a greater understanding of the dominant state of our political existence in these decades of Cold War, for Oswald, willy-nilly, became one of the leading actors in this tragicomedy of superpowers who, with limited comprehension, lived in dread of each other.”

-Norman Mailer from *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*

Why in the damned world would anyone want to jump back into the morass of lies and suspicions surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy? Does it really matter any more who pulled the trigger or triggers in this most awful of American tragedies? Thirty-two years (at time of *Oswald's Tale's* publishing in 1995) and many millions of hours of research have intervened since that black day in Dallas and still no presiding scenario has been resolved. Shouldn't we just let this ugly little sore in American history heal up and scar? Shouldn't we just move on? Why must we keep picking at this scab, causing it to bleed again and again? Why should Norman Mailer, arguably the most important American journalist of the last fifty years, invest his reputation and that of Random House Incorporated to worry again upon this old bone?

“One stimulus to the writing of this book was an offer from the Belarus KGB to allow a look into their files on Oswald,” writes Mailer as he begins volume two of his 791 page non-fiction novel, *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*. To Assassination nuts and conspiracy fiends alike this is reason enough to exhume this old bone. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the gradual opening—veil by veil—of clandestine Russia, there should be considerable interest, to some, about what the KGB might have thought about this ex-marine's tentative defection to the Soviet Union. Add to this Mailer's own invariably comprehensive reportage and his

unique capacity for psychological investigation, and much like his exploration of convicted killer Gary Gilmore in the Pulitzer Prize winning *Executioner's Song*, we have a fascinating and involving piece of writing for just about anyone who likes a good who-done-it.

“We are,” writes Mailer, “in effect, studying an *object* (to use the KGB's word for a person under scrutiny) as he tumbles through the prisms of a kaleidoscope. It is as if by such means we hope to penetrate the psychology of Lee Harvey Oswald.” It is Mailer's intent to paint a psychological portrait of Oswald, so real and dynamic, that, in conjunction with the details of the incident itself, it will help us decide whether Oswald was in fact a lone assassin, as determined by the much maligned Warren Commission in 1964. Or if he was part of a “probable” conspiracy, as reported by the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1979. This is an ambitious task. Even for Mr. Mailer. Objectivity needs to be absolutely hairline in the subtle slanting of every unanswered nuance in the creation of his highly complex protagonist Lee Harvey Oswald.

“This book...was undertaken without a fixed conclusion in either direction;” confesses Mailer early on in the book. “Indeed, it began with a prejudice in favor of the conspiracy theorists. All the same, one's plan for the work was to take Oswald on his own terms as long as that was possible—that is, try to comprehend his deeds as arising from nothing more than himself until such a premise lost all headway.” Intriguing concept.

And through the course of the book, Mailer makes every effort to provide objectivity, so much so, that this white whale of Lee Harvey Oswald feels to be as much an enigma to the author as he proceeds, as he is to the reader in his progress. Over and over again, he attacks the facts, fearlessly and painstakingly, particularly in his review of the KGB reports that repeatedly question Oswald's motives, his intelligence, his felicity with the Russian language, and his emotional stability. The Russians, it seems, were just as uncertain about Oswald's defection as were the American's. Curiously, intelligence agencies on both sides of the Iron Curtain viewed this twenty-year-old wildcard marine in the role of double agent.

Roughly half the book concerns itself with Oswald's life in Russia, and it is mostly new material for the thirsty assassination buff. Upon this solid foundation, the second half of the book reconstructs the assassination drama upon a backdrop of investigative survey. Drawing from the

Warren Report, the work of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, Gerald's Posner's *Case Closed*, Priscilla McMillan's *Marina and Lee*, Jim Marrs' *Crossfire*, Carl Oglesby's *The Yankee and Cowboy War*, as well as many other notable sources, Mailer presents the entire case, every loose end, every conspiratorial supposition, every strained conjecture, with clarity and objectivity, to the extent, that there may be no better book to introduce a new initiate to the subject. In total, the picture he paints is an excellent one, *but not a new one*. Thirty (now forty) plus years of investigation by scores of researchers have brought no conclusive answer, only question after question and serious suspicions about the dark machinations behind the deed. And Mailer can do no better. Still he takes a good swing at it.

After giving us everything, accurately and dramatically, Mr. Mailer inexplicably concludes his work with a gaping implausibility. Despite the fact that he has shown Oswald had questionable FBI liaisons, had indirect contact with mob kingpin Carlos Marcello, and that the CIA connected Oswald to the assassination attempt on John Birch Society leader, General Edwin Walker, six months prior to the JFK assassination and did not arrest him; despite the fact that the House Select Committee on Assassinations' extensive investigation concluded "that the most likely family bosses of organized crime to have participated in such a unilateral assassination plan were Carlos Marcello and Santos Trafficante;" despite the fact that there is no piece of evidence nor argument more explosive or revealing than the once secreted-away by Time-Life home movie taken by Abraham Zapruder, that all but unequivocally proves, regardless of what Oswald might have been doing, that at least one shot—and most likely the fatal shot—came from some location other than the School Book Depository; despite all this, Mr. Mailer concludes, "that Lee had the character to kill Kennedy, and that he probably did it alone." He then qualifies this assessment by saying that, "the odds in favor of one's personal conclusion (meaning Mailer's) can be no better than, let's say, 3 out of 4 that he is definitively guilty and the sole actor in the assassination." *Three out of four?* How about one in a thousand? This is indeed strange. No, worse than that! In reading this statement, one wonders if Mailer bothered to read his own book. If Mailer's psychological portrait proves anything, it's that Oswald did have the makings of a megalomaniac, but that also he looks like a perfect patsy, the perfect pawn! God, it almost seems that Mailer, like Ruby, is screaming at us to have him take a lie-detector test!

(Personally, I don't get it. And why does it bother me so that Mailer's last book was about the CIA?)

So what exactly does this mean? To Hell with the details and the facts of the assassination? Damn the worries about who shot who and magic bullets and Jack Ruby's meeting with Santos Trafficante in a prison cell in Cuba in 1959? Forget about Mailer's book? Forget about this being a book review?

Yes, let's curtail this book review and take a different tack.

Let's step back and take a long look at this thing, this assassination phenomenon, the act and the reaction and our obsession with it all, as it tumbles through the prisms of the socio-political kaleidoscope of these United States. What does the entire phenomenon tell us about ourselves? And what does it tell us about our government and how they view us, the public?

Within the story of the Kennedy assassination, we are given an x-ray vision of the innermost workings of our government. Through the course of the phenomenon—assassination, cover-up, debate, congressional hearings, private investigation, more congressional discussion, book after book, we are indirectly given a window into the bizarre world of the intelligence community that lies behind the public facade of the White House and Capitol Hill. We are introduced, piece by piece, to the various gradations of informants, operatives, agents, cut-outs, and illicit sources that are part of the intelligence community's information gathering network and operations. We see the jealousies, firewalls, turf wars, and power struggles between agencies, the FBI, the CIA, the Dallas Police Department, the Warren Commission, even underworld criminal organizations and the KGB. We are shown the substructure of the intelligence community. And it is a sobering sight. We see the monster created out of the Cold War, an “intelligence” monster of lies, double-agents, and disinformation. We see the true nature of that fifty-year “war,” an era that could be accurately labeled the age of deceit—on both sides of the Iron Curtain. And no event, no war, no catastrophe, more exposes the icy heart of that age than the gangland slaying of our 35th President.

In 1964, the party line was that a lone nut in Dealey Plaza was responsible. This lie has steadily torn the heart out of our democracy. Forty-four years after the fact, the central casualty

of the Warren Commission's charade has been the public's trust. Stop the man or woman on the street. Ask them if they trust the system that broods inside the freeway belting our nation's capital. So bad is the state of things that laughter is apt to be the most common response. Followed by a sardonic, NO. And then maybe a flood of vulgarities. *Houston, we have a problem!* And it all begins with this first serious crack in America's trust of its own government. The Warren Report, with its intimate connections to the Vietnam War, marked the turning point—when America gave over its innocence to a steadily increasing cynicism.

Ten months after the assassination, in September of 1964, the findings of the Warren Commission were made public in a twenty-six volume report. Simply, the commission had determined that Lee Harvey Oswald was the assassin and that he was working alone. Despite the impeccable reputation of Chief Justice Earl Warren, chairman of the commission, the report was met with considerable criticism almost immediately. Still it passed silently into the realm of recent history and was mostly forgotten by all but a handful of individual researchers. Approximately three years later, New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, at the suggestion of Louisiana Senator Russell Long, read the Warren Report in its entirety. The glaring inadequacy of the commission's work led Garrison to his well-known and mostly ridiculed investigation of the assassination. Though his research uncovered many loose ends and considerable evidence of a deep vein of treachery in our own government, Garrison's scream fell primarily on deaf ears and like the Warren Report dropped quietly into the past.

The question of conspiracy, however, would not go away. Gallup polls taken in the early seventies showed that nearly eighty percent of the country believed that Kennedy's assassination was the result of a conspiracy. Seventy percent felt the same way about the murder of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. In 1975, Texas Congressman Henry Gonzalez called for a Congressional review of the assassinations of John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and the shooting of George Wallace. There was great reluctance in the old guard to reopen these cases, but in September of 1976, after a year of feet-dragging and postponement, the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) came into being. Two years later, during which time several key witnesses to the Kennedy assassination met “accidental” deaths or committed

suicide and Congressman Gonzalez, in frustration, had quit the leadership of his own committee, the HSCA quietly concluded there had, in fact, been at least one other gunman involved in the shooting and that this suggested a conspiracy of unknown order. Even though this meant that at least one assassin had gotten away scot free, the report was acted on in no way. No arrests were ever made. No further action was taken.

The media reaction was, by now, predictable. The *Washington Post* offered the following “likelihood” in response to the commission's findings of a “possible conspiracy” and evidence of a second gunman:

Could it have been some other malcontent who Mr. Oswald met casually? Could not as many as three or four societal outcasts with no ties to any one organization have developed in some spontaneous way a common determination to express their alienation in the killing of President Kennedy? It is possible that two persons acting independently attempted to shoot the President at the very same time.

Despite the proliferation of this bizarre scenario by the media's “coincidence theorists” (or the two lone nuts in Dealey Plaza theory), the HSCA's modest admission did give serious researchers the hope that the truth could be found and that maybe there was a way to the bottom of this dark crime.

In the early eighties, English film-maker Nigel Turner produced a stomach turning five-hour documentary on the assassination. Turner's hypothesis proposed that Kennedy was shot by a trio of Corsican hit men hired by forces within the government of the United States. It was aired on the BBC and included the public's first real glimpse of Abraham Zapruder's home movie, showing the gruesome fatal shot in nauseating clarity. (It would be ten years before the documentary would be aired in the United States, though only on secondary television networks.)

In 1989, Jim Marrs published his book *Crossfire*, possibly the most exhaustive look to date at the facts of the case. In many ways, this book, along with several others, could be considered the true fruit of the Select Committee's work. It said what the HSCA had discovered but didn't have the power or courage to say; there was every likelihood that, as Nigel Turner's

documentary claimed, the underworld was somehow involved in the assassination.

In 1991, Oliver Stone produced the movie *JFK*, based to a large extent on Marrs' book and Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins*. For the first time, the general conspiratorial story involving the CIA, the Mafia, and FBI compliance reached more than just the fringe of our society. In the wake of this, such was the disquiet in the constituency, Congress for the third time was called upon to review the records.

In 1992, the same year Mailer was commissioned to write *Oswald's Tale*, then President George H. W. Bush signed into law the John F. Kennedy Assassinations Records Collection Act, known as the JFK Act. The act called for a five-member board of reviewers to go through the entire federal archive of the assassination and to open to the public as many of the then closed files as they possibly could. This included the archives of the FBI, the CIA, and the HSCA. Though mostly unpublicized and somewhat lessened in impact by the passage of time, the board's completed work became part of Congressional record in 1996.

At first glance, it seems that the JFK Assassinations Records Collection Act was a sincere effort to answer the needs of a doubtful public and eager researchers. A closer look suggests that the government was equally doing its best to minimize the damage done to its image by Stone's movie and Marrs' book, watering down the incrimination by opening the archives—or at least opening them a little bit more. A layer deeper, we realize that the cover-up had only been given another blanket to toss over the corpse, though in a subtler more discretionary manner.

If we look at this entire process of government review from start to supposed finish, it seems that the truth has been doled out to the public by Congress in fifteen year bites—1964, 1978, 1996, like a watchful parent revealing the facts of life to a child as his maturation allows. But we are not children. We elected these government officials. They work for us. *We pay them!* And in this light, the work of the Assassinations Record Review Board befouled its own water—just as the Warren Commission and the HSCA had. They leave just enough unsaid to further cynicism. An inspection of the review board's guidelines provides the necessary insight—and the outline, by omission, of the dark heart of the beast they chose not to reveal.

In section 6 of the JFK Act, five grounds for postponement of public disclosure are cited.

(That is, the five reasons a file can be kept closed to the public by the review board.) First is that it might offer a threat to national security by identifying an agent or an intelligence source that is still active in the field. Second, that it would reveal the name of a person who provided confidential information to the government. Third, that the matter would “constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy” that would outweigh the public's need to know. Fourth, that it would “compromise the existence of an understanding of confidentiality currently requiring protection between a government agent and a cooperating individual or a foreign government” in such a way that it would outweigh the public's need to know. Fifth, that it would “reveal a security or protective procedure currently used by the secret service or some other government intelligence agency.” Again, all of this makes a certain amount of sense—superficially. So let's skin off another layer or two.

The Assassination Records Review Board, a five-member panel selected by President Clinton and sworn in April 11, 1994, reviewed all the relevant documents from the CIA, FBI, and the House Select Committee on Assassination. For the most part, those documents were opened entirely. For the most part. But certain documents or parts of documents remain withheld from the public and will remain that way until the year 2017. One must wonder, within the above stated *legal* guidelines of disclosure, exactly what could be buried in the JFK archives that must still be kept secret after all these years? One must labor to find solid grounds for any secret that is more valuable to national security than the public's belief in the government's version of the story. The Cold War world is a thing of the past. The Soviet Union is dissolved. And terrorism is our government's current concern, not strategic war. It is time for whatever long buried skeletons that remain in the Cold War closets of the intelligence community to come out. Lack of trust weighs more heavily on our people than any supposed specter of enemy infiltration or terrorist act, any confidentiality, any single agent in the field, any fear of double or triple agents gaining access to our war chest of secrets—especially any that existed in the 1960's. *The trust of the people and the truth about the assassination far out weigh all other factors.*

So again, what could they be hiding that is so sensitive? Is it that the CIA is run by bunch of bunglers? Is it the shenanigans that surrounded the Bay of Pigs intrigue? Or that the CIA plotted the assassination of Fidel Castro—several times? Or is it the strength of J. Edgar

Hoover's hand in American Politics in the 1950s and 1960s? Is it the real horror of the Cointelpro blitz and Hoover's American Gestapo? No. All of this is historical record already. But what is there to hide if Oswald was a lone assassin? Then again, didn't the HSCA tell us that several guns shots were unaccounted for in Dealey Plaza that November day? Is there still no answer to this begging conundrum? Or reason to answer it?

Excepting hyperspace aliens, this writer can only imagine two conceivable reasons that would prevent every document from being opened to the public right now. First would be that organized crime played a significant part in the assassination. Yes, national security would indeed be in jeopardy if we were told that organized crime engineered a political coup in 1963; because that same organization would surely still be in place today, if only more legitimized by the power it gained by that coup. Second would be that our own intelligence community, backed by corporate feudal lords, was responsible for Kennedy's death. And again national security wavers here—due to fear of a populist revolt—because that intelligence community still presides in the shadows with unknown quantities of influence. Both of these ugly possibilities are strongly suggested by the information gathered by independent researchers in the forty years since the act. And in some ways, these two reasons are one, because if we look closely at the nature of the beast, there is but the subtlest difference between the intelligence community fringe and organized crime. The Iran-Contra scandal was not an aberration, but simply business as usual. Drugs for guns is the *modus operandi* of the real terrorism that grips and controls not just this country but the entire globe.

So is this what must remain unspoken? That the criminal underworld and the intelligence community was/are joined at the hip in an unholy push-me-pull-you relationship. Many researchers would say this is already known and substantiated. But admitting it publicly to mainstream America would be something else—especially when no one could say that it doesn't still exist or how it might be applied to something like the buildup to the Iraq War. Just as Lyndon Johnson informed Earl Warren that a Third World War could very likely result if Oswald were not found to be a lone assassin—and quickly, the Assassination Record Review Board saw vast government upheaval weighing in their scales as they contemplated the names of certain agents, certain types of information gathering, special protection methods, and the

confidentiality of certain witnesses, because many of these agents are underworld associates and, perhaps, still working within the network of organized crime. This is pretty much the open secret that is repeatedly denied. Fraternizing with and hiring hoods and drug dealers and gun runners is part of the dark game our intelligence community plays. In fact, the intelligence community is so riddled with criminal contact on its outer edges, it is frightening to imagine, much less know, what goes on at the center. What would it really mean if underworld interests of fifty years ago still thread through the corporate/intelligence world of today? Is there any reason to believe that they don't? No. Because all evidence—Congressional graft, our dirty little wars, the world's vast money laundering network, the politics of the poppy harvest in Afghanistan—suggests that we still do live in an age of secrecy and deceit, perhaps, much more so than ever before.

So why would anyone want to jump back into the morass of lies and suspicions surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy? Because it is as a good place as any to start the retelling of American history since the Second World War. Because in this so-called information age, information means absolutely nothing if it is based upon a boldface lie—or, more accurately, a nest full of boldface lies. How can democracy work if the public is informed through half-truths and disinformation? There is an important lesson to be learned here. There is a necessary level of innocence that a maturing democracy must advance through. Because, yes, the sad, sad truth is that the cover-up worked. The act has been successfully removed to the realm of history. It has become an abstract thing, filled with names of individuals that are either dead or long gone from the scene. Unfortunately, however, the organizations and the ugly network of intelligence that moved those pawns into place most certainly still remain in some form or another today. And they know for a fact that no lie is too big to tell—because they have gotten away with a whopper.

So, once again, why would a large media syndicate publish a book about Lee Harvey Oswald, a book written by one of America's most visible and respected writers, and then put that book on the cover of *The New York Times Book Review*? Why did this book come into existence? Containing its suspect message? What does it tell us about ourselves and our world? The truth is too disturbing to reveal. *The cover-up is still alive.*

Like a spoiled relationship unclosed, there is a terrible unknown, a boiling unsolved crime perpetrated forty-four years ago, residing at the center of the collective being and spirit of our country. We proceed into the twenty-first century with an unhealing wound at the heart of our group psyche. A wound still bleeding and eating at the core of what we once called the American Dream. Every moment that this wound is left undressed, every moment the federal archives are left partially closed, every moment we don't confront the unsavory part played by organized crime in the deepest recesses of our government and its intelligence community, we deny, even dismantle, the ideal of democracy in America.

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