The Cultivation of a Period of Disillusionment in America: Results of the Federal Handling of the John F. Kennedy Assassination

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This thesis is submitted to the faculty of the History Department of Hanover College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts degree

April 20, 2018

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Abstract

This thesis examines the significance of the federal handling of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in cultivating a period of disillusionment between the American people and the federal government. The graphic events at Dealey Plaza in Dallas, TX on November 22, 1963 sent a shiver down the spine of America as the country witnessed the tragic murder of the 35th President of the United States. The event became immortalized in the American psyche and perpetuated its infamy as, in the absence of the government and press providing adequate answers, conspiracy theories filled the void.

With thousands of different theories pertaining to potential conspiring groups, nations and multiple assassins, it is important to separate historical truth from popular fantasy. This thesis will examine the public image Kennedy crafted before and during his presidency as well as the conclusions set forth by two official Federal investigations alongside revelations revealed in newly declassified material: (1) The Warren Commission of 1964 issued by President Lyndon Johnson that concluded Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin; (2) The House Select Committee on Assassinations of 1979 which concluded there was a second gunman as well as the likelihood of multiple conspirators but could not do so with unequivocal certainty; (3) The 2017 release of numerous previously classified documents, subsequent to the 1992 JFK Records Act, from the national archives which contains information that calls into question the legitimacy of the aforementioned investigations.

The American people had long been calling into question the legitimacy of the official narrative set forth by the Warren Commission and then preserved by the media. New documents show why the lasting public mistrust of government surrounding the assassination was reasonable and logical. While 12 percent of the collection remains classified by U.S. Intelligence in the national archives, no definitive conclusion can be made on the true nature of any potential plot to kill President Kennedy. However, this work will conclude that the failure to satisfy well-founded public skepticism marked a tipping point and helped catalyze an unprecedented rise in public disapproval of the United States Government and politics.
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I: Introduction

John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Democratic Senator from Massachusetts, won the presidency by a narrow margin in the 1960 election. However, he would prove to be a surprisingly popular president throughout his incomplete first and only term. He was a gifted public speaker with a substantial background as a decorated Navy Lieutenant during WWII; he then went on to become a U.S. Congressman and Senator before serving as Commander in Chief. The people became enamored with the Americanism that JFK personified along with the charismatic and beautiful First Lady, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, at his side. He had meticulously crafted a public image in his pre-presidential career that Americans were drawn to and respected.

To the American people, his policies and rhetoric embodied American exceptionalism, optimism and vigilance in a time of vast global and domestic uncertainty. President Kennedy not only inspired American citizens, but in many ways, he was the source of hope that had captured the post war era’s ambitious spirit and elevated it to new heights. He was the first Roman Catholic as well as the youngest President ever elected to the highest office in the land. He pressed for civil rights, rejuvenated a stagnant U.S. economy and showed during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 that diplomacy can and will triumph in the face of nuclear escalation. To the majority of Americans, he was a hero; this factor further solidified his lasting reputation as a martyr and a national icon with an unfinished mission. His death in Dallas, Texas left America with a wounded heart, a thirst for answers, and newfound lack of confidence in their government.
II: Political Ascendance: Crafting a Public Image

All his life John F. Kennedy was pushed by his father, former U.S. ambassador to Britain, Joseph Kennedy, to accomplish great success in the public sphere. Following the heroic death of his elder brother in WWII, JFK was thrust into the role of the eldest son, and with it came an almost monarchical set of expectations to the new “heir” to Joseph Kennedy’s dynasty. Following JFK’s graduation from Harvard and subsequent military career, Joseph began pressing JFK to run for political office, feeling that he had the necessary prerequisites. Joseph Kennedy ran most of his son’s first campaign for U.S. Representative of Massachusetts’ 11th congressional district. Politically JFK had the upper hand with a prestigious degree, being a published author and having an impressive war record including a Purple Heart. His father had substantial wealth for campaign funds as well as elite connections that helped catalyze his Democratic primary victory. This was followed by his victory against his Republican opponent where he received 73 percent of the vote and a seat on Capitol Hill.1 This was the first major step towards fostering his grand aspirations for furthering his political career.

Jack Kennedy, as JFK was often referred to as, had a reputation as a womanizer which he knew could harm his political image. He began to place more attention on his career and less on his social life. He was introduced to Jacqueline Bouvier by family acquaintances in 1951 and became fascinated by her classiness and beauty. She and Jack shared interests and aspirations; she stood out among his many other love interests as a woman who he truly admired. She was

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also Catholic which was important to the Kennedy family. The two were married in the fall of 1952 and Jack could now add “family man” to his already impressive résumé.²

John Kennedy had served for six years as a U.S. congressman and wanted to turn his ambitions towards a run for the Senate. The Kennedy machine continued to drive Jack’s career, garnering him a victory in the 1952 U.S. senatorial election. During and after this election, JFK continued to bolster his national image. With the help of his campaign advisor and younger brother, Robert Kennedy, they secured the Democratic victory by a margin of 70,000 votes. The campaign portrayed him as youthful but wise, progressive yet loyal to American principles.³ It was his tenure as Senator that significantly expanded Jack’s individual political identity. Gaining the prestige that comes along with the senatorial office allowed Jack to separate himself from his father’s influence and progress his own ideology and vision. He began attracting a new staff around him, one very important character was a young lawyer named Theodore Sorensen. Sorensen saw the incredible potential in Jack Kennedy but realized that he needed to focus more of his attention on domestic policy rather than his prime interest of international affairs. Sorensen helped Jack develop a more concrete set of liberal principles, something his father cared little about. Through his growth as a Senator he became known as somewhat of a bipartisan legislator who was willing to go against his own party if he felt it was the right thing to do. This, coupled with his affulence for media exposure, continued to grant him an excellent public image despite the fact most elder statesmen in his own party viewed him as a wild card and some would even say disloyal.⁴


Petty Capitol Hill politics would prove to be of little concern to JFK. He wanted the favor of the people and his constituents; his campaign for re-election to the senate would focus on just that. He began touring all corners of his small coastal state giving speeches to virtually any public gathering or organization big or small. His speeches were optimistic and lacked substantial partisan rhetoric and instead focused on what could be done for the people of Massachusetts. Along with those speeches came an extensive annual report on Kennedy’s legislative actions and prospective proposals on how to better the lives of his constituents. As a result of his openness and amiability with the media, nearly every Massachusetts newspaper endorsed his re-election including right-wing publications like the Boston Herald.\footnote{Sorensen, Theodore. \textit{Kennedy: Decision-Making in the White House}. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1965. 74-75.} To put it simply, JFK was very well-liked and respected by his constituents even those who disagreed with him politically. His popularity showed in the election of 1958 where Jack received three quarters of the total vote, marking his fifth consecutive electoral victory. His election broke three state records: largest voter turnout, largest margin of victory by 873,000 votes, and he was the first to win every county in the state.\footnote{Sorensen, Theodore. \textit{Kennedy: Decision-Making in the White House}. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1965. 77.} Senator Kennedy had now cultivated the crucial public approval and notoriety that was necessary to permit a run for the Presidency in 1960.

On the second of January 1960, John Fitzgerald Kennedy announced he would run for the presidency in November of that year. He had substantial confidence that was well-placed; He had utilized his time in Washington to build an image of character, intelligence and competence, most importantly with the American people. There had never been a Roman Catholic President in America before, partially for lack of Catholic nominees and partially because of a majority
Protestant population with lingering prejudice against Catholics. However, the aura of charisma and trustworthiness that Jack had sustained, along with his reiteration of his stance on the separation of church and state helped quell some of the doubts surrounding his religious beliefs affecting policy. However, the very mechanism that lead his success and successful image was also a point of criticism; many opposition journalists and campaigners attacked his success as a “product of a public relations campaign funded by his family’s fortune [rather] than the result of political accomplishments.”

This was not entirely untrue; without his father’s influence and wealth, Kennedy would not have been able to ascend the political ranks as quickly and effectively as he did. However, it can also be stated that without Jack’s likeability and effectiveness as a public speaker, this feat would also have not been accomplishable despite the reoccurring post-war health issues regarding his back pain. His image would be an important factor in the election of 1960. After a long series of state primaries Kennedy won the Democratic nomination and would face off against Republican nominee and sitting Vice President, Richard M. Nixon.

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Nixon had more political experience and prestige than Kennedy had, but he lacked the charisma and youthful energy of the 43-year-old Kennedy. Robert Kennedy ran his brother’s campaign and knew that his Vice-Presidential pick would be an important factor in gaining public support and confidence. Kennedy chose the Senate Majority Leader, Lyndon Baines Johnson, to be his running mate. Johnson provided a plethora of legislative experience at the highest levels and equally as important he could help galvanize the support of the predominantly...
Democratic south. Although Johnson had said unpleasant comments regarding Jack and his family in the past, the two men set their differences aside for the good of the party and the continuity of their aspirations. Nixon chose a less formidable but equally well-known running mate, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. The stage was set; it was up to Kennedy to prove himself as a viable candidate to a population that favored his demeanor but doubted his experience. In his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, Kennedy called the time period a new frontier encapsulating civil rights, the Cold War, economic concerns and national ambitions. He used his superior command of language to lay out a clear vision for what his candidacy could deliver, stating, “That is the choice our nation must make—a choice that lies not merely between two men or two parties, but between the public interest and private comfort—between national greatness and national decline—between the fresh air of progress and the stale, dank atmosphere of ‘normalcy’—between determined dedication and creeping mediocrity.” This was the precedent he and Robert wanted to set, that Kennedy represented the future of America while Nixon was a relic of the past.

One of Jack Kennedy’s biggest allies was the media, television in particular. This wasn’t because the media was on his side per se, but rather that the Kennedy’s knew how to use television exposure to maximize its political benefits. Gallup polling in early August showed Nixon with a six-point lead over Kennedy, 50 percent to 44 percent. This drove the Kennedy campaign to place extra importance on the first ever televised presidential debate on September 26, 1960. The results could not have been better for Kennedy. He had prepared vigorously and

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was well rested, clean-cut and sharply dressed for the occasion. His opponent was less fortunate; he was exhausted from campaign travel which was compounded by a lingering illness and refusal to use makeup. The intellectual debate was balanced between the two candidates, yet most analysts concluded that Nixon edged out Senator Kennedy on policy. However, the American people came to a different conclusion: Gallup polling showed that 43 percent of respondents chose Kennedy as the winner compared to Nixon’s mere 23 percent. An audience of 75 million Americans watched the first debate; people were excited to have the newly popularized communication medium bring them Washington D.C. politics right to their living-room, so they could make a better-informed decision. Following the historic event poll numbers had shifted in Kennedy’s favor, a voter preference poll showed Kennedy at 49 percent compared to Nixon’s 46 percent. Even more significantly, a poll of undecided voters showed they preferred JFK over Nixon by a margin of 3:1. The debate would prove to be one of the most important events of the entire campaign especially since the next three debates would not attract as significant of an audience as the first, giving JFK a lasting impression as the superior candidate in multiple respects.

Kennedy won the Presidency on November 9th with 303 total electoral votes to Nixon’s 219. Jack was told officially by his friend and advisor Theodore Sorensen as he awoke the next morning. Sorensen equated the victory to eight factors: “His defensive actions on religion, the television debates, differing campaign tactics, party identification, running mate, negro-southern choices, foreign policy and the recession.” All of these factors were crucial in gaining Kennedy’s victory since he did not receive as much Catholic support as he had hoped, nor the

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Protestant democrat turn out. Despite an adequate victory in the electoral college, he had only won the popular vote by a margin of 120,000 votes. Jack was ecstatic about the electoral win but disappointed by the narrow margin of his victory. As soon as Nixon called to concede and congratulate him, the President-Elect and his close staff went straight to work; the narrow margin of popular votes drove Kennedy to work harder than ever to win over America’s hearts and minds.
III: The Kennedy Presidency

On the 20th of January 1961 John F. Kennedy was sworn in as the 35th President of The United States. He inherited from President Eisenhower a dangerous Cold War, a challenged economy and a racially unstable nation. However, Kennedy was ready to use his charisma to instill in the American people a sense of hope and unity. In his inaugural address he proclaimed, “We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first [American] revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans--born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage--and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.”

Kennedy hereby, proclaimed a profoundly new spin on the historic American values as it related to a Cold War era. He was committed to proving himself as competent and capable leader of the nation. His first priorities were economic stability and national security.

Kennedy inherited from the Eisenhower administration a plan by the CIA to train Cuban refugees, with the help of American military forces, to invade Cuba and overthrow their Communist Dictator, Fidel Castro. CIA Director, Allen Dulles, informed the president of this plan and he had reluctantly given the go-ahead. The coalition force of around 1,400 men landed in what was known as the “Bay of Pigs” on April 17, 1961. The plan relied on a significant number of Cubans to join forces with the rebels before retreating to the Escambray Mountains.

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some 80 miles away from the Bay of Pigs. The plan failed colossally; The CIA had underestimated the loyalty to Castro and nearly all of the men were taken prisoner and the nature of the plot was revealed.\textsuperscript{15} This was a major stain on Kennedy’s record as he took public responsibility for the failure of the invasion as any good leader should. He also fired Dulles as a result of the failed invasion since he privately placed the blame on the CIA and its leadership, or lack thereof. The failure was a result of, as Sorensen put it, “the gap between decision and execution, between planning and reality.”\textsuperscript{16} The failed invasion put a strain on Soviet relations with America as well as a precursor to what many consider to be Kennedy’s finest hour.

Nearly a year and a half after the Bay of Pigs debacle, trouble for America was brewing on the small Island of Cuba just a mere 90 miles from the Florida Keys. However, this time the trouble was not of its own making, rather a foreign threat was emerging from across the Atlantic. The Soviet Union wanted to place ballistic missiles in Cuban missile silos, thus creating an imminent and direct danger to the entire continental United States. These fears were confirmed by reconnaissance flights conducted over Cuba by American U-2 spy planes. Kennedy now had to figure out why the Soviets would make such a bold move. He knew that Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, did not hold the same powerful grasp over the Soviet Union as Stalin did, and he needed to show strength in response the attempted invasion at the Bay of Pigs. Kennedy’s military advisors pressed for action including a naval blockade accompanied by targeted airstrikes on Soviet bases in Cuba. The President was hesitant to take any actions that would escalate the situation; he had learned his lesson from the Bay of Pigs. After consulting with his


Attorney General and brother, Kennedy decided to take the high road and enact a naval blockade of the island with orders for U.S. ships to stop any Soviet ships carrying weaponry to the region. He called on Khrushchev to end the crisis by removing all missile installations from Cuba and refraining from future campaigns to nuclearize the small island nation. Khrushchev would not back down so easily; he refuted President Kennedy’s attempt to label him as the aggressor by reminding the world that the ultimatum had been issued by Kennedy. This of course was not incredibly effective as everyone could see who the clear aggressor was in the situation.

The Cuban Missile Crisis raged on for nearly two nerve-racking weeks and is still to this day regarded as the closest point humanity ever came to full scale nuclear war. The legacy of the crisis would luckily not be one of bloodshed, in fact, there were no casualties pertaining to the incident at all. The commitment to diplomacy by President Kennedy led to the calm headed realization by Khrushchev that the only win that could come from the situation would be a collective one for both sides. This is precisely what happened; Khrushchev agreed to abandon the Soviet campaign to place missiles in Cuba, and Kennedy publicly promised to leave Cuba alone, and also privately promised to remove certain missiles from U.S. launch sites in Turkey.

The whole world had been watching nervously as the events unfolded in Cuba in October of 1962. Kennedy came away the hero, and not just of diplomacy or of America. He became a hero of the world, the savior of humanity who had avoided World War Three and he did so without firing a shot. It became his single greatest achievement partially because the alternative if he had failed would have been apocalyptic in nature. But to the average American he had

prevailed by staying true to his values and had beaten the Soviets with American idealism not American muscle.

Throughout his short 1,000 days in office, Kennedy sought to improve race relations, combat inflation and unemployment and promote de-escalation in the Cold War. He developed a relationship with civil rights activist, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. whom he had helped get out of jail as a Senator. His beautiful First Lady, Jacqueline Kennedy had taken on the role of Queen in a sense, restoring and renovating the White House so that the American people could be proud of the national monument. Kennedy’s beautiful family was essentially American royalty and their popularity rivaled that of the British Royal Family. The Kennedys were the first to get involved in the growing sphere of the entertainment industry. They had equally famous friends like singer Frank Sinatra and Kennedy allegedly had an affair with singer and actress Marylin Monroe, which later was proven true and only added to the mystic image of JFK. His true legacy would still remain his heroism in solving the Cuban Missile Crisis and essentially saving the world. But it wasn’t until the President’s untimely death in 1963 that his place in history would be solidified for all time.
IV: The Assassination: Dallas Texas 11/22/63

Figure 2: John and Jacqueline Kennedy Ride through Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963.19

On a hot Friday morning in November, hundreds of patriotic Americans lined the streets of Dallas for the chance to smile and wave their American flags at the charismatic leader of the free world, President John F. Kennedy. Air Force One landed at Love Field at 11:30 a.m. The President and First Lady greeted the many people gathered there at Love Field before as his motorcade proceeded through the streets of Dallas. Though it was a beautiful morning and they traveled with a massive police escort, a hidden threat lurked among shelves of textbooks in a local schoolbook depository building near Dealey Plaza; ex-marine Lee Harvey Oswald was preparing to take the shot that would rock the nation to its core. Kennedy was on his way to the

Dallas Trade Mart to deliver a campaign speech. Most members of the local and national press were waiting for him there since a presidential motorcade was not considered important enough to cover in the media. The Presidential Limousine convertible approached Dealey Plaza with Governor John Connally of Texas and his wife up front, along with the First Lady seated next to Kennedy in the back. The clock struck 12:30 pm as the motorcade reached the infamous grassy knoll near Elm Street. The first shot came from behind passing through Kennedy’s neck and the proceeding to hit Governor Connally in the shoulder and wrist. Sadly, the 3rd and final shot taken by Oswald struck Kennedy in the head and ultimately took his life later that day at Dallas Parkland Hospital. The first shot did not elicit a reaction from much of anyone, it was too sudden and neither Kennedy nor Connally seemed blatantly effected. Many witnesses later recalled they thought it was a car backfiring. However, the kill shot sent a shiver down the spine of all those watching and sent the entire plaza into panic mode. Mothers and Fathers frantically attempted to shield their children with their own bodies, screams of terror and confusion echoed throughout the air, and poor Jackie Kennedy desperately tried to pick up the pieces of her beloved husband’s shattered skull off the back of the Presidential limousine.  

Secret Service agent Clint Hill was assigned to Mrs. Kennedy’s detail and had been riding in the follow-up car. Noticing something was wrong after the first shot hit the President, he began to run towards the Presidential limousine. He arrived at the secret service handlebars on the back of the vehicle as the fatal head shot struck Kennedy. He pulled himself up on the back of the car, gave a “thumbs down” to the other agents behind him, then told the driver to get them to a hospital. All the while he was using his body as a human shield to cover Jack and

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Jackie from any further barrage of bullets, but they never came. The motorcade sped to Parkland Hospital four miles away, but the chances did not look good and Agent Hill knew it. In a 2017 interview with Valuetainment, he recalled his initial reaction as he climbed in the vehicle, “The President fell with his head in [Jackie’s] lap, and the right side was up so I could see in this wound and all the brain matter was gone in this area, just completely gone, and his eyes were fixed and I assumed he was dead. Right there. It was an instantaneous death.”

JFK was officially pronounced dead at Parkland Memorial Hospital 30 minutes later, at 1 p.m.

Immediately after the motorcade sped off beyond the triple underpass, the reality of what had happened set in throughout Dealey Plaza; a chaotic manhunt ensued for whoever was responsible. The Dallas Police Department sprang into action, scouring the area surrounding the plaza, particularly the Texas Schoolbook Depository where the shots were thought to have come from. Lee Harvey Oswald had left both the Carcano rifle and the three empty shells on the sixth floor of the depository; the rifle was hastily hidden between boxes. Oswald rushed down to the third floor to get a Coca-Cola from a vending machine where he was confronted by officer Marrion Baker, who quickly moved on when Oswald’s boss, Roy Truly, confirmed that he was an employee of the building. Oswald was on the run; he returned to his boarding house and retrieved his snub-nosed revolver. He proceeded to walk southbound. At this time a head count was taken by the Dallas Police of all those in the depository; Oswald was missing. His description was sent out over the radio. By mere chance, an 11-year veteran, Officer J.D. Tippet spotted Oswald and approached him calmly but cautiously. Tippet pulled his patrol car over to the curb and got out to confront Oswald. Eye-witness testimony confirmed that Oswald pulled

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out his revolver and proceeded to shoot Tippet twice in the head and twice in the chest before fleeing the scene. Bystanders sprang into action, Domingo Benavades and T.F. Bowley contacted dispatch using Tippet’s radio and reported what had happened. Police rushed to the surrounding area, eventually getting a tip that a suspect had entered the Texas Theater. Officers found Oswald in the theater and he was arrested at 1:40 p.m. after a brief altercation in which his revolver was pried from his hands. Law enforcement now had a prime suspect with an incriminating case building against him.

Oswald was taken to the Dallas police station where he was questioned by Dallas detectives, Secret Service agents, as well as the FBI. He proved to be defiant to authority, especially the feds. The agents who spoke with him recalled his answers to be seemingly rehearsed; he was reluctant to give any meaningful answers about the shootings. However, he did proclaim his political stance as a Marxist and his support for Cuba. He refused to answer any questions about his two firearms or the murders he allegedly committed until he had legal representation. When asked about his views on the President he stated that he and his wife liked the President and his family but that he had his disagreements with him on policy, although he would not reveal the details of those views. When questioned by reporters while in custody, Oswald had repeatedly denied the allegations against him. One remark would spark much controversy in the future; Oswald proclaimed to the press, “I’m just a patsy.”

Walter Cronkite reported via CBS News at 12:40 Central Standard time, that three shots were fired at the President’s motorcade and that the President was seriously wounded by the shooting. At 1:38 CST, Cronkite did a follow up report, visibly struggling to conceal his

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emotions, in which he confirmed the death of President Kennedy and likelihood of continuation of the office to Lyndon Johnson.\textsuperscript{25} According to a study by the National Opinion Research Center, 68 percent of adults found out about the shooting within the first half hour; subsequently by the late afternoon the report found that over 99 percent of adults were aware of Kennedy’s death. The report also stated that four out of five people, “felt the loss of someone very close and dear.”\textsuperscript{26} The sheer speed at which the news traveled speaks volumes to the importance of the assassination itself. In a pre-digital age, for news to spread so fast had not happened since the Japanese Attack on Pearl Harbor. Despite the significance of the infamous day in 1941, the television had allowed the grim news of the death of the 35\textsuperscript{th} President to travel at an unprecedented pace. A veil of sorrow fell upon the United States of America that afternoon, and soon moved all around the globe as the loss of a Cold War hero was felt in the hearts of collective humanity.

Figure 3: Commuters in New York City read of John F. Kennedy's assassination, Nov. 22, 1963.\textsuperscript{27}

The world wanted answers for this heinous crime against humanity. As the news spread across the country, students were dismissed from schools, traffic came to a halt on many major roadways and the majority of the country sat glued to their televisions or radios, patiently awaiting answers. As the chaotic weekend progressed, the media frantically attempted to understand the complex and incomplete situation in Dallas and relay the nature of the events to the American people. With multiple conflicting initial reports, they did their best piece together a

narrative that made the most sense. One thing was clear, the prime suspect was the apprehended
24-year-old Lee Harvey Oswald. With no formal charges brought against him, much was
initially left to speculation. The public was overcome with grief and quick to turn their
emotional strife into hatred for the man who supposedly killed their President. The media had
aided in crafting a preliminary assumption of Oswald’s guilt throughout weekend reporting. Two
days after the President’s assassination, Oswald was being transported to an alternate prison and
the press awaited to catch a glimpse of the alleged assassin. At 11:20 a.m. (CST) Dallas police
officers escorted him to the basement of the building where they were met with a swarm of
media reporters and cameras. Suddenly, a figure emerged from the crowd of cameras and shot
Oswald point-blank in the stomach with a .38 caliber revolver in the basement of the police
station on live national television. Local bar-owner, Jack Ruby was arrested for the murder of
Lee Harvey Oswald who was pronounced dead, ironically, at Parkland Memorial Hospital at
1:07 p.m. (CST)\textsuperscript{28}

The one man who could have provided so many answers was gone, and while many felt a
brief sense of vengeful justice, the grave implications of Oswald’s untimely death were quickly
realized. Jack Ruby’s motives for killing Oswald were unclear, however, two possibilities
danced in the collective mind of Americans: (1) Ruby felt the same anger as a majority of the
country did and took revenge, (2) Ruby was intent on silencing Oswald to prevent disclosure of
potential co-conspirators, whether it be individuals, groups, or nations. This proved to be
unsettling because either way the quest for the truth about the nature of Kennedy’s death had
been severely hindered with the loss of the prime suspect, conspiracy or not. The American

Row, 1967.
people simply wanted to know ‘why?’ and the answer to that question will never be wholly agreed upon as a result of Ruby’s actions. With the swearing in of Lyndon Johnson as the 36th President of the United States, he knew that one of his first priorities would be to provide answers on why his predecessor had been murdered along with his suspected killer.
V: The Warren Commission 1964

On November 29, 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson issued Executive Order No. 11130, thereby establishing a bipartisan commission to investigate the murders of President John F. Kennedy, Officer J. D. Tippet and their alleged assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald. He appointed Chief Justice Earl Warren of the Supreme Court to head the commission, which took on his name. It consisted of Senators, Representatives, other high-ranking members of government and the country’s best lawyers. Among these men were future President, Gerald R. Ford, and former CIA director Allen Dulles who was fired by John F. Kennedy following the Bay of Pigs. With the country grieving the loss of their charismatic leader, speculations and theories swarmed around the incident. It was important that the government provide answers to honor the wishes of the people, but also to prove the competence of the new administration. The Warren Commission had their work cut out for them with their lead suspect having been killed, as well as the necessity to quell potential international repercussions as a result of the incident. Rumors of Cuban or Soviet involvement complicated matters further, despite the fact that official reactions from both hostile countries were of compassionate sympathy for America’s loss. Americans were quick to suspicion of Communist activity. The idea was firmly planted in everyone’s minds that Oswald had shot the President, but the idea that he had acted alone seemed too simple; people wanted to know who he was working for. The stated purpose of the Warren Commission was to, “uncover all the facts concerning the assassination of President Kennedy, and to determine if it was in any way directed or encouraged by unknown persons at home or abroad. In this process, its objective was to identify the person or persons responsible for both the assassination of President Kennedy and the killing of Oswald through an examination of the
evidence.” 29 This was not simply an inquiry into the murder of a public figure, it was a global phenomenon that, depending on the outcome, could have monumental effects on international security.

The Warren Commission differed from previous Presidential Commissions very definitively. For example, the Roberts Commission on Pearl Harbor was directed to reevaluate how prepared the U.S. military was for similar attacks and how to improve national defense. The uniqueness of Warren Commission was that its clear purpose was the discovery of the truth behind the assassination and subsequent events. This meant a plethora of aspects needed to be taken into consideration including; forensic evidence, eye-witness testimony, reports from the Dallas police, FBI, Secret service etc. The motive of Oswald to kill the President was one of the key questions, and since he could not say himself, an extensive investigation of his background as a U.S. Marine, foreign travels and contacts, as well as political beliefs needed to be conducted to get an idea of who this man was and why he would want to kill the President. The ten-month long investigation was the most extensive criminal investigation in the history of the United States. It consisted of testimony from 552 individual witnesses of the event and subsequent events. Over 3,000 pieces of forensic evidence and explanatory exhibits contributed to the conclusions drawn by the commission. 30

Following the Warren Commission’s establishment of a narrative of the events, it listed the conclusions it came to, followed by the complete record of testimony and evidence it

reviewed. The conclusions were the most pressing and most important aspects of the report and selected crucial aspects are as follows:

1. The shots which killed President Kennedy and wounded Governor Connally were fired from the sixth-floor window at the southeast corner of the Texas School Book Depository.

2. President Kennedy was first struck by a bullet which entered at the back of his neck and exited through the lower front portion of his neck, causing a wound which would not necessarily have been lethal. The President was struck a second time by a bullet which entered the right-rear portion of his head, causing a massive and fatal wound.

3. There is no credible evidence that the shots were fired from the Triple Underpass, ahead of the motorcade, or from any other location.

4. The weight of the evidence indicates that there were three shots fired.

5. The shots which killed President Kennedy and wounded Governor Connally were fired by Lee Harvey Oswald.

6. The Commission has found no evidence that either Lee Harvey Oswald or Jack Ruby was part of any conspiracy, domestic or foreign, to assassinate President Kennedy.

7. In its entire investigation the Commission has found no evidence of conspiracy, subversion, or disloyalty to the U.S. Government by any Federal, State, or local official.

8. On the basis of the evidence before the Commission it concludes that Oswald acted alone. Therefore, to determine the motives for the assassination of President Kennedy, one must look to the assassin himself.

9. The Commission could not make any definitive determination of Oswald's motives.\(^{31}\)

These conclusions, while each were backed up by credible evidence, did not fully satisfy the skeptical public which simply did not think this man could have acted alone and successfully pulled off such a feat. The evidence showed that for this narrative the Warren Commission set

forth to be true, the first bullet that hit the President must have also been the bullet that wounded Governor Connally. This became known as the ‘single bullet theory.’ Conspiracy theorists dubbed it the ‘magic bullet theory’ simply due the fact that it had somehow “magically” caused four separate wounds between the two men. Analysis of the only known video footage of the assassination was crucial to establishing a ballistically accurate explanation. Abraham Zapruder was a local clothing manufacturer who had captured the entire assassination on his 8mm personal video camera. By breaking the video down frame by frame, the investigators could see the exact moment each bullet struck both men in the motorcade. The analysis showed that 10 fames had passed between Kennedy’s initial reaction and Connally’s, which was about a half a second. Oswald’s bolt-action Carcano rifle could not have fired two shots in this amount of time; therefore based on conclusion by the Warren Commission, either both men were struck by the same bullet or there had to be a second gunman.\textsuperscript{32} The Warren Commission stood firmly by its conclusion that Oswald was the lone assassin.

The Warren Commission had also stated in its conclusions a degree of uncertainty regarding the three shots and which one had hit Connally. The report declared, “Although it is not necessary to any essential findings of the Commission to determine just which shot hit Governor Connally, there is very persuasive evidence from the experts to indicate that the same bullet which pierced the President's throat also caused Governor Connally's wounds. However, Governor Connally's testimony and certain other factors have given rise to some difference of opinion as to this probability but there is no question in the mind of any member of the Commission that all the shots which caused the President's and Governor Connally's wounds

were fired from the sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository.\textsuperscript{33} This conclusion in particular was a basis for controversy and seemed to point, albeit with the lack of physical evidence, to the possibility of a second assassin. This theory was backed up by eyewitness testimony on the infamous grassy knoll located on the right side of the motorcade between the triple underpass and the Texas School Book Depository. Eight bystanders had witnessed the assassination from the opposite side of the street from the knoll, and unanimously claimed that the shots had come from that area and not the depository. Seven witnesses were questioned by the commission that were standing on the railroad tracks of the overpass at the time of shooting. Six out of seven of these witnesses also claimed to hear shots come from the grassy knoll area and five of them also claimed to have seen a ‘puff of smoke’ in the same area as their attention was drawn away from the motorcade because of what they interpreted to be the location of a shooter.\textsuperscript{34}

There were fundamental problems with the Warren Commission’s investigation from the start. Since it had nearly unlimited government resources, the investigation could amass an incredibly large collection of data. Such a large pool of data can amplify issues by creating multiple points of contradictions, which then need to be evaluated to discern which were credible. Pre-digital age investigations meant mounds of paper documents that had to be sorted by hand and required substantial hours be put in. Much of this task fell on the shoulders of the commission’s professional lawyer staff, since members of Congress and the Supreme Court were far too busy to conduct such an operation. The raw data was therefore verified, summarized and


organized in a manner by which it could be more easily reviewed by the commission. The necessity to provide answers quickly to the public and to the world was not lost on the members of the Warren Commission. The investigation clearly laid out a substantial case showing Oswald’s guilt by displaying past tendencies in behavior and damning physical evidence. It was difficult to find physical proof of the eye-witness testimony concerning the grassy knoll and a potential second shooter. However, historian Edward Epstein points out, “Recognizing the difficulty of proving a negative statement to a certainty, the Commission reasoned that if a conspiracy had existed, some evidence of it doubtless would have come to the attention of the federal investigative agencies. Since no such evidence had come to light, the Commission concluded explicitly ‘on the basis of evidence before the Commission’ that ‘Oswald had acted alone.’ This left an air of uncertainty surrounding the commission; no one seemed to think that Oswald had been falsely accused of the assassination. However, the notion persisted that the investigation had not adequately pursued the possibility of a second gunman particularly on the grassy knoll in Dealey Plaza. As time progressed in the years following the publication of the Warren Report, more evidence would continue to surface including documents and evidence that had not been reviewed by the original investigation.

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VI: House Select Committee on Assassinations 1979

The ensuing years were riddled with vast public debates over the conclusions drawn by the commission. Hundreds of books were written regarding the event and many had come up with their own version of perceived truth. The public devoured the pop culture surrounding the President’s death; many understandably did not believe the government had provided enough answers in relation to a potential conspiracy. The American obsession was exacerbated in 1968 when JFK’s brother and presidential candidate Robert Kennedy was also assassinated by a lone gunman. That same year American minister and civil rights activist, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also lost his life to an assassin’s bullet. All three of these men had close relationships in life and were attempting to lead the country in a new direction towards peace and equality. Their loss was felt in the hearts of a majority of Americans, even those who disagreed politically. These three major assassinations that happened in a short period of five years left an unsettling feeling in the minds of Americans. The events of 1968 felt like déjà vu from 1963, leaving people to wonder how this could be happening all over again. It sparked a renewed interest in the assassination of the President five years earlier.

The decade of the 1970’s was tumultuous decade and saw the United States’ most serious government scandal to date: the Watergate scandal and impeachment of the 37th President of the United States, Richard Nixon. His successor, Gerald R. Ford then pardoned Nixon from any crimes he may have committed involving surveillance of his political opponents. This sparked a great deal of outrage from the public and continued a growing trend of distrust between the American people and the government stemming from the federal handling of the first Kennedy assassination. However, it would be the public surfacing of the prime piece of evidence from the Warren investigation that would truly reinvigorate national concerns surrounding the event. On
March 6, 1975 Geraldo Rivera aired the infamous Zapruder film on his ABC show *Goodnight America*, which marked the first time the American public was able to view the sole video footage captured from the event. The shocking revelation that came from the public disclosure of the film was the behavior of the President’s head immediately following the third and fatal shot to his skull. The American people could clearly see for themselves that John Kennedy’s head clearly moves backwards and to the left as a result of the kill shot. This sparked public outrage and skepticism regarding the legitimacy of the Warren Commission’s lone assassin conclusion. The clear question was, how could a shot from behind the president cause his head to move backward towards the direction of the rifle and not away from it in accordance with the bullet’s trajectory? At a time when only three television networks existed, many average Americans had tuned into Rivera’s broadcast and it became the hot topic all over the country following its debut.36 The public outcry for answers sparked a new investigation into the assassination of President Kennedy as well as Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. In 1976 the U.S. House of Representatives passed House Resolution 1540, by a vast margin, which established the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA). This investigation lasted nearly three times longer than the Warren investigation and had access to information that had not yet surfaced in 1964. The Committee knew that a vast majority of Americans did not believe that Oswald had acted alone, and they needed to re-examine all of the facts and evidence to hopefully restore faith and transparency in the U.S. government.37

The HSCA came to multiple conclusions that were contradictory to the Warren Commission’s own conclusions and were as follows:

1. Lee Harvey Oswald fired three shots at President John F. Kennedy. The second and third shots he fired struck the President. The third shot he fired killed the President.
2. Scientific acoustical evidence establishes a high probability that two gunmen fired at President John F. Kennedy. Other scientific evidence does not preclude the possibility of two gunmen firing at the President. Scientific evidence negates some specific conspiracy allegations.
3. The committee believes, on the basis of the evidence available to it, that President John F. Kennedy was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy. The committee was unable to identify the other gunmen or the extent of the conspiracy.
4. Agencies and departments of the U.S. Government performed with varying degrees of competency in the fulfillment of their duties. President John F. Kennedy did not receive adequate protection. A thorough and reliable investigation into the responsibility of Lee Harvey Oswald for the assassination was conducted. The investigation into the possibility of conspiracy in the assassination was inadequate. The conclusions of the investigations were arrived at in good faith, but presented in a fashion that was too definitive.
5. The Department of Justice failed to exercise initiative in supervising and directing the investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation of the assassination.
6. The Federal Bureau of Investigation performed with varying degrees of competency in the fulfillment of its duties.
7. The Central Intelligence Agency was deficient in its collection and sharing of information both prior to and subsequent to the assassination.
8. The Warren Commission performed with varying degrees of competency in the fulfillment of its duties.38

These conclusions essentially confirmed the long-held suspicions Americans had surrounding the assassination but failed to provide answers once again. What the report did confirm was that the conspiracy theories were not just some crazed obsession founded in sensationalism, but rather they were rooted in truth and logic. The HSCA report also confirmed that the investigation into Lee Harvey Oswald by the Warren Commission was sound, however, its investigation into the possibility of a greater conspiracy was not. The issue was that the House Committee failed to provide an alternate version which history could accept, leaving the official

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version in American textbooks to be that of the Warren Commission, despite the fact that the House Committee clearly stated that the Warren Commission failed in its stated purpose to find the whole truth surrounding the incident. The proclaimed probability of a second gunman based on acoustic evidence called into question the legitimacy of the Warren Commission’s conclusions. Historian Paul Boyer attributes the lack of a further investigation into potential conspiracies by the Warren Commission as, “the political motive of reassuring the public, rather than the larger task of sifting all the evidence, had led the commission to assert an overtly confident lone-assassin conclusion.”  

This theory makes logical sense from the standpoint of the Johnson administration which was eager to gain the trust of the American people and avoid potential large-scale escalation in the cold war with Oswald’s ties to the U.S.S.R. and Cuba.

Foreign Nations were not the only suspects in the minds of conspiracy theorists. Many believed that the plot to kill the president had been entirely domestic in nature, implicating the CIA, and organized crime. This certainly retained merit as a result of the federal Church Committee of 1976 which concluded that the CIA had conspired with components of organized crime to assassinate the Communist Dictator of Cuba, Fidel Castro. The revelations of the Church Committee coupled with the release of the Zapruder film renewed the skepticism surrounding JFK’s death and even took it to new heights in 1979 when the HSCA published its conclusions.  

The HSCA concluded that the CIA, Soviet government and Cuban government had no involvement in the assassination. However, it could not say the same for Cuban extremist groups, nor the national syndicate of organized crime. This conclusion solidified the idea that a

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greater conspiracy existed, and that the truth was being withheld. The issue of legitimacy was further exacerbated by the HSCA conclusions that the CIA, Secret Service, FBI, Justice Department and Warren Commission had all been deficient in their sworn duties to truth and service. These conclusions did not find evidence of malice or deliberate failure, but that did not stop critics from implying that it existed. The hysteria surrounding the newfound discrepancies would gradually fade as time progressed, since the fact remained that the HSCA conclusions could not definitively disprove the Warren Commission as it still lacked the necessary evidence to do so.

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VII: Declassification of National Archive Documents 2017

The debate surrounding the nature of Kennedy’s assassination had died down since the 1970’s, until Hollywood director Oliver Stone debuted his film *JFK* in 1992. The film was wildly popular and brought a whole new generation of Americans to fall in love with the mystery of John F. Kennedy’s life and death. This film and its popularity arguably sparked a response from the current administration under President George H.W. Bush to draft Senate Bill S.3006, which required,

“That each assassination record be publicly disclosed in full, and be available in the Collection no later than the date that is 25 years after the date of enactment of this Act, unless the President certifies that: (1) continued postponement is made necessary by an identifiable harm to the military defense, intelligence operations, law enforcement, or conduct of foreign relations; and (2) the identifiable harm is of such gravity that it outweighs the public interest in disclosure.”

The 25-year deadline expired in 2017, at which point the current administration under President Donald Trump authorized the declassification of an additional 34,873 documents from July to December of that year. This release marked 88% of the entire collection now open to the public via the National Archives database. Within these documents, conspiracy theorists hoped to finally find the bombshell information that could finally disprove the Warren Report by proving the conclusions of the HSCA with hard evidence. This was not the case, however the document release did allow public disclosure of documents that led to those conclusions being

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made in the late 1970’s. Multiple declassified documents show why so called ‘conspiracy theorists’ were not simply connecting dots that weren’t actually there, but rather that their skepticism was rooted in documented evidence within the collection.

There is a plethora of revelations shown by these new documents, however, some are more pertinent than others. Documents show that public skepticism surrounding the assassination was well founded and based on factual information within the archives, much of which had been available to one or both of 20th century federal investigations. A document dated just one day after the assassination of the president was titled, *Contact of Lee Oswald with a member of Soviet KGB Assassination Department*. The document stated that the CIA had intercepted a call from the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City made by Oswald to KGB agent Vladimirovich Kostikov on October 1st, 1963. The CIA had Identified Kostikov as part of the KGB’s 13th district which was responsible for sabotage and assassination. While this information does not implicate the KGB or Soviet Union in any definitive conspiracy what the document does show is prior knowledge by the CIA of Oswald’s potential as an assassin. The inaction of the agency regarding his communication with America’s sworn enemy gives credibility to the HSCA conclusion of malfeasance on the part of the CIA.

The nature of the Warren Commission’s stated purpose and its actual purpose had long been called into question by the public. A memo written by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover on November 24th, 1963 shows why this skepticism was rational. In the memo Hoover states, “What I am concerned about, and so is Mr. Katzenbach, is having something issued so we can

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convince the public that Oswald is the real assassin.” The FBI director mentions Mr. Katzenbach who was the Deputy Attorney General at the time and would go on to serve as President Johnson’s Attorney General. The focus in this memo is that the language Hoover chose to use is particularly troubling. Two words in particular suggest a potential coverup: the use of “convince” and “real.” The implications of convincing the public implies an effort to deceive the public rather than provide truth. The choice of Hoover to use the phrase “real assassin” rather than “lone assassin” implies that Oswald either wasn’t the assassin or that there was another assassin as well. Evidence overwhelmingly points to Oswald being the assassin but not necessarily the only one. Documents like this one continue to foster theories of an orchestrated cover-up of all the facts.

A document dated November 26\textsuperscript{th}, 1963 detailed a report by British Intelligence (MI-5) in which an anonymous telephone call was made to a reporter at Cambridge News at 12:05 (CMT). The caller told the reporter to call the American Embassy in London for some “big news.” The reporter did not think much of it until he heard the news of Kennedy’s assassination, at which point he reported it to authorities.\textsuperscript{46} The issue with the timing of the call is that it was made 25 minutes prior to the assassination. This could only be explained by a random coincidence or the existence of a larger conspiracy to assassinate the President. The identity of the caller was never discovered but the call was confirmed to be local, leaving only hypothetical


explanations. Nevertheless, the timing of the coincidence seems to imply that someone besides Oswald knew about the assassination before it happened.

Another document dated May 30th, 1975, contained a compilation of data regarding a CIA plot to assassinate Fidel Castro using components of organized crime, particularly Chicago mob boss, Sam Giancana. The plan was reportedly pursued by the agency in the early years of the Kennedy administration and eventually brought to the attention of Attorney General Robert Kennedy by CIA agent Sheffield Edwards. AG Kennedy was reportedly angry with the CIA for pursuing such a plot without the knowledge of the administration. The report claimed, “Attorney General Kennedy stated that the CIA should never undertake the use of mafia people again without first checking with the Department of Justice because it would be difficult to prosecute such people in the future.” 47 The document also stated that CIA Director and Warren Commission member, Allen Dulles was responsible for the authorization of the assassination plan. This revelation gives credibility to the idea that the CIA and Mafia were capable of conspiring to commit an assassination. It also shows the mistrust between Kennedy’s Justice Department and the CIA, including Mr. Dulles.

The collection of documents goes on to explain a plethora of shady dealings by the American Intelligence agencies. It displayed multiple warnings that should have been red flags to law enforcement that could have led to preemptive action and possibly stopped the murder of President Kennedy and the subsequent murder of Lee Harvey Oswald. Twelve percent of the massive collection remains classified pending further review by intelligence agencies. President Trump dictated a 180-day extension set to expire on April 26, 2018, at which point he will

reevaluate the further declassification of documents in the database. The significance of these documents is not that they prove any one conclusion or theory, but rather that they give credibility to the lasting doubt surrounding the official version of history found in the Warren Commission report.

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VIII: Lasting Significance: Era of Disillusionment

When examining the lasting historical significance of the John F. Kennedy assassination and subsequent investigations, it is crucial to acknowledge the lasting effect they had on the American population. The death of this universally admired president coupled with a failure to answer the simple question of ‘why?’ with an adequate degree of certainty led to a period of disillusionment between the American government and the general population. The 60’s are known as a decade of unrest and strife. With the exception of the Cuban Missile Crisis and Bay of Pigs debacle, the first three years of the decade were relatively happy times as a result of economic prosperity and the overall sense of optimism that stemmed directly from Kennedy himself. The years following the assassination were plagued by foreign escalation in Vietnam and domestic escalation in race relations, riots and more political assassinations. The negativity persisted to the 1970’s with the Watergate scandal, through the 1980’s with the Iran-Contra affair, and through the 1990’s with the many scandals of the Clinton Presidency. The events in Dallas on 11/22/63 marked a tipping point in American Democracy when the blind trust of the people was no longer guaranteed, it had to be earned by the government and this would prove to be an increasingly difficult task in the age of mass media.

The emotional trauma of the event resonated with the American people and transcended generations. Public confidence in the U.S. government had never been greater than when President Kennedy held the highest office in the land, and it would never return to the level it reached during his first and only term. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2013 proves this theory through a compilation of years of polling data.
The downward trend in public trust unmistakably begins between 1963 and 1964, the years of the assassination and publication of the Warren Commission’s report. The optimism that John F. Kennedy had so carefully crafted and meticulously materialized had unfortunately died with him. America lost belief in the system and would continue to lose it as the following decades were plagued by one scandal after another.

Figure 4: Public trust in government 1958-2015 polling results.49

The Warren Commission had been founded to reassure the America public that their government was honest, capable and competent. Unfortunately, it ended up having the opposite effect as the mass media culture was able to consistently bring forth contradictions to the report. Whether the contradictions were based fully in truth or not, the American public was consistently reluctant to accept the conclusions of the report. A Gallup poll taken in 2013 compiled years of public opinion data surrounding the Kennedy assassination; it found that at no point since the publication of the report has a majority of Americans accepted the lone assassin conclusion.

Figure 5: Public opinion polling data on the existence of a conspiracy involved in the assassination of John F. Kennedy.  

The compiled polling data proves the lasting ineffectiveness of the Warren Commission to satisfy public skepticism regarding a conspiracy to kill President Kennedy. While certain events such as the release of the Zapruder film in 1975 clearly increased skepticism, the test of

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time has shown that Americans have a lasting disdain for the lone assassin conclusion of the Warren Commission.

The amicable image John F Kennedy had crafted during his life and presidency, combined with the aura of mystery surrounding his premature death helped solidify his lasting reputation as a martyr. This phenomenon embedded his legacy in the minds of Americans in a way that no other modern president has been able to accomplish.

| Job Approval Averages for U.S. Presidents' Entire Time in Office |
|---------------------|------|
| Kennedy             | 70%  |
| Eisenhower          | 65%  |
| George H. W. Bush   | 61%  |
| Clinton             | 55%  |
| Johnson             | 55%  |
| Reagan              | 53%  |
| George W. Bush      | 49%  |
| Nixon               | 49%  |
| Obama               | 49%  |
| Ford                | 47%  |
| Carter              | 46%  |

Figure 6: Average job approval ratings for recent U.S. Presidents throughout entire term(s).\(^5\)

President John F. Kennedy's Place in History

How do you think each of the following presidents will go down in history -- as an outstanding president, above average, average, below average, or poor? [RANDOM ORDER]

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Outstanding/Above average</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Below average/Poor</th>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>Ronald Reagan</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Bill Clinton</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<td>Dwight Eisenhower</td>
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<td>Richard Nixon</td>
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Nov. 7-10, 2013

GALLUP

Figure 7: Public opinion poll on historical legacy of recent U.S. Presidents.52

John F. Kennedy held the highest overall approval rating (70%) of any post WWII President while in office, through the first term of President Obama. He also maintains the highest approval rating of any contemporary President as of 2013 with 74% of modern Americans rating him as “Outstanding/Above Average.” In fact, the data shows that his approval rating actually went up following his death.

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IX: Conclusion

The loss of President Kennedy left a dissatisfied America years later to wonder “what could have been had he not been assassinated and possibly re-elected?” A popular theory is that Kennedy would not have escalated the war in Vietnam and that race relations would have been substantially better, giving way to a better alternate reality in America. The world will never know what might have been, nonetheless, the notion that a part of the American dream had died with President Kennedy lived on well into the 21st century. Just a week after the President’s death Jackie Kennedy came up with a way to “revive” her husband, or at least his legacy. But she did more than that, she created a way to immortalize him just as much as Oswald’s bullet did. She requested an interview with LIFE Magazine’s Theodore H. White. She spoke nothing of the assassination in the interview, rather she focused on an analogy between her husband’s administration and King Arthur’s Camelot. She drew the comparison because it had been JFK’s favorite Broadway play and his favorite line she quoted in the interview, “Don’t let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment, there was Camelot, “There will be great presidents again, but there will never be Camelot again.”53 Jackie wanted her husband’s legacy in death to reflect equally with his legacy in life, one of idealism and exceptionalism.

Although President Kennedy had only been in office for about 1,000 days, the impact of his profound words and embodiment of the American dream still resonates more than 50 years later, although, as many historians will point out, his mediocre accomplishments while in office were not synonymous with the overwhelming praise he receives. The idea of an America icon

like John F. Kennedy continues to fascinate and inspire Americans; just as his death and the lack of adequate answers regarding it, continues to frustrate Americans. The true nature of his assassination and the controversy surrounding it may never be solved even with the full disclosure of the document database. At this point in history, it may no longer matter because John F. Kennedy has taken his place alongside Abraham Lincoln as an American hero, patriot and legend. The optimism, hope and American exceptionalism that he portrayed in his inaugural address are values that Americans want to believe are not fully lost. Despite the fact that the years following his death were plagued by scandal, hardship and mistrust, as long as America holds dear the memory of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and what he stood for, the dream will never die.
In Memory of John F. Kennedy

1917-1963

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X: Bibliography

Primary Sources:


**National archive data requires a citation of the individual document ID number shown in footnotes.

Secondary Sources:


