THE ASSASSINATION

President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated in Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963, at right around 12:31 P.M., as he rode in an open limousine in a motorcade. President Kennedy was accompanied by his wife, Jacqueline Kennedy. Texas governor John Connally and his wife were seated in front of the Kennedys, with the governor sitting in front of the president. Two Secret Service agents were in the limousine’s front seat. Soon after Kennedy’s limousine turned from Houston Street onto Elm Street in Dealey Plaza, witnesses began hearing shots ring out. Less than a second after Kennedy’s limousine passed beneath the oak tree on the northwest end of Elm Street, Kennedy appeared to clutch or reach toward his throat or upper chest with both hands. Kennedy’s wife, Jacqueline Kennedy, seated to his left, quickly turned to see what was going on with her husband. Governor Connally showed clear signs of having been struck by a bullet about half a second after Kennedy began to bring his hands up toward the area of his throat. Several seconds after the first shot was heard, witnesses saw the president’s head explode as a result of gunfire. The limousine then sped off toward Parkland Hospital. Doctors at the hospital labored mightily to try to save Kennedy’s life, but to no avail. He had obviously been virtually dead on arrival. Kennedy’s Vice President, Lyndon B. Johnson (also known as LBJ), took the oath of office a short time later that afternoon, and America had a new president.

Although several men were arrested in and near Dealey Plaza and in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area in the aftermath of the shooting, the Dallas Police Department (DPD) eventually turned all of them loose. The police quickly focused their attention on a man who was arrested in a movie theater a few miles from Dealey Plaza about two hours after the assassination. The man’s name was Lee Harvey Oswald. He was arrested on the suspicion that he had killed a policeman named J. D. Tippit about 35-45 minutes after the assassination in a suburb of Dallas just a few miles from Dealey Plaza. The police learned that Oswald worked in the same building from which many witnesses said shots were fired and in which the police found a rifle and some spent bullet shells by one of the windows facing the plaza. Oswald never made it to trial because he was gunned down in the DPD’s basement by a Dallas nightclub owner named Jack Ruby two days after the assassination on November 24.

THE WARREN COMMISSION

On November 29, 1963, just one week after the shooting, President Johnson appointed a special commission to investigate the assassination. Known as the Warren Commission (WC), it submitted a final report to LBJ on September 24, 1964, less than a year after it was formed. The commission pretty much supported the conclusions of the FBI’s report, but with some important exceptions. The commission concluded the following:

- Oswald, acting alone, shot Kennedy.
- There was no conspiracy. Oswald had no confederates, before, during, or after the assassination.
- Oswald fired three shots. One of these shots missed the entire limousine. No other shots were fired.
The same bullet that struck Kennedy in the back exited his throat and went on to strike Governor Connally in the back, tore through his chest, hit his right wrist, and ended up embedded in his left thigh. This conclusion would quickly come to be known as the single-bullet theory. The bullet that the commission claimed performed the above scenario is officially known as Commission Exhibit 399, which is usually abbreviated as CE 399.

Oswald used a 6.5 mm Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, which is bolt-action weapon.

Oswald killed Officer J. D. Tippit.

Jack Ruby’s killing of Oswald was a spontaneous act caused by Ruby’s professed desire to spare Jackie Kennedy the ordeal of an Oswald trial.

Ruby had no significant ties to the Mafia and did not kill Oswald to silence him on behalf of a conspiracy.

Ruby most likely gained access to the police department’s basement by walking down the Main Street ramp.

THE HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE ON ASSASSINATIONS

The U.S. House of Representatives voted to establish the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) in September 1976, and the committee functioned until January 1979. The committee issued its report in 1979. The HSCA reached several conclusions that were sharply at odds with the WC’s conclusions. Among other things, the select committee concluded the following:

- Kennedy was probably killed as a result of a conspiracy.
- Four shots, not three, were fired during the assassination.
- One shot was fired from the grassy knoll. The shot from knoll missed both Kennedy and the limousine.
- Impulses caused by four gunshots were recorded on a police dictabelt recording that was made by a patrolman’s mike that was stuck in the “on” position as his motorcycle rode near and through Dealey Plaza during and after the shooting. The committee’s acoustical scientists concluded that an analysis of the recording revealed, to a degree of certainty of 95 percent or better, that one of the shots could be traced back to the grassy knoll.
- Ruby probably did not enter the DPD basement via the Main Street ramp, and might have gained access to the basement by help from someone on the police force.
- Ruby lied to the WC about the number and nature of his trips to Cuba prior to the assassination.
- In the months leading up to the assassination, Ruby made long-distance phone calls to organized crime contacts, and some of these phone calls did not appear to have a viable innocent explanation.
- Ruby’s killing of Oswald was not a spontaneous act but had the appearance of a hit designed to silence Oswald.
- The WC failed to adequately investigate the possibility of conspiracy.
- The FBI and CIA were deficient in supplying the commission with information in their possession that related to the assassination.
The security arrangements for the Dallas motorcade may have been uniquely insecure.

The pathologists who performed Kennedy's autopsy failed to perform a proper medical-legal autopsy.

Analysis of the photographic evidence revealed that Kennedy was hit by a bullet as the limousine passed beneath the oak tree. Even though this shot came at a time when a gunman’s view of Kennedy from the Depository’s sixth-floor window would have been obscured by the oak tree, the committee concluded the shot came from that window.

In addition, the HSCA endorsed the WC’s conclusion that Kennedy and Connally were struck by the same non-fatal bullet, and that Oswald fired that shot and the head shot. The committee also agreed with the commission’s finding that Oswald killed Tippit.

As for the conspiracy itself, the committee hinted in its report that elements of the Mafia might have been involved. The committee’s chief counsel, G. Robert Blakey, later teamed with Richard Billings and wrote the book Fatal Hour: The Assassination of President Kennedy by Organized Crime which was based mostly on the committee’s research. Blakey and Billings argued that Mafia boss Carlos Marcello was involved in the assassination conspiracy.

**TWO BASIC VIEWS**

There are two basic views about the assassination. One view is that one gunman, acting alone, killed Kennedy, and that the gunman had no accomplices. The other view is that more than one gunman fired at Kennedy, and that those gunmen were part of a conspiracy. Most researchers who argue there was a conspiracy believe the following:

- The shooting of President Kennedy was beyond the capability of any one man to perform, and therefore there must have been more than one gunman. They point out that no rifleman in any of the assassination simulations has scored two hits in three shots in 6-9 seconds against a moving target from a 60-foot elevation on the first attempt, which is what Oswald allegedly did. They also note that nearly everyone who saw Oswald fire a rifle said he was a rather poor shot.

- Much of the evidence against Oswald was planted.

- At least one shot was fired from in front of Kennedy's limousine, most likely from the grassy knoll. Conspiracy theorists point out that dozens of witnesses in Dealey Plaza believed gunfire came from the grassy knoll, and that several witnesses saw puffs of smoke rising from the spot from which the gunfire seemed to be coming. They also note that some rifles do emit visible smoke, and that the HSCA firearms panel confirmed this in its report. They further note that several witnesses smelled the scent of gunpowder on or near the knoll right after the shooting.

- There was a large wound in the right-rear area of Kennedy's skull, indicating a shot from the front. Dozens of witnesses reported seeing this wound, including doctors, nurses, and federal agents. They argue that the autopsy photos of JFK's head, which don't show a large right-rear defect, were either taken after the large defect was covered over cosmetically or that the photos were altered to make it appear the back of the head was undamaged.

- The Zapruder film seems to show reactions to more than just three shots.
The single-bullet theory is impossible. Critics of the lone-gunman theory note that no bullet in any of the assassination-related wound ballistics tests has emerged with as little damage as CE 399, the alleged “magic bullet,” after doing the same amount of damage that CE 399 supposedly did. They also point to studies that have found that there was no path from Kennedy’s back wound to his throat wound that did not require smashing through the spine.

Oswald was being impersonated, and his impersonators left a trail of false evidence that was to be used against Oswald later. Conspiracy theorists note that the recently released transcript of a phone call between then-FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and Lyndon Johnson shows that Hoover informed Johnson that someone had been impersonating Oswald at the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City.

There was a rather large-scale cover-up of the facts about the assassination, in an attempt to lead the public to believe there was only one gunman and no conspiracy.
Questions / Study Guide

Read *A Basic Introduction to the JFK Assassination*. Using information from the reading, answer the following questions on the Answer Sheet provided. Be neat and legible with your answers.

1. What is JFK’s full name?
2. Where was JFK assassinated (city & state)?
3. When was JFK shot (time & date)?
4. Who was in the limo when JFK was shot?
5. On what street did the shooting occur?
6. In what (now) famous plaza did the shooting occur?
7. Where did the first shot hit JFK?
8. Where did the second shot hit JFK?
9. Which bullet also hit Governor Connally?
10. To what hospital was JFK rushed after the shooting?
11. Who was JFK’s Vice President?
12. Who shot JFK?
13. Who else did this suspect shot?
14. Who shot the suspect named in #12?
15. In what location did this second shooting occur?

According to the Warren Commission…
16. Did Oswald act alone?
17. Was there a conspiracy?
18. How many shots were fired?
19. Who appointed the commission?
20. What is the Warren Commission’s theory commonly called?
21. What type of weapon did Oswald use?
22. By what entrance did Ruby gain access to the DPD?

According to the House Select Committee on Assassinations…
23. Who established the Committee on Assassinations?
24. Did Oswald act alone?
25. Was there a conspiracy?
26. How many shots were fired?
27. On what piece of evidence did the Committee base their belief that 4 shots were fired?
28. How did Ruby probably get into the DPD basement?
29. Was Ruby’s shooting of Oswald spontaneous or planned?
30. From where did Oswald shoot?

Two Basic Views
31. What argument supports that there was more than one gunman?
32. From where did the second gunman shoot?
33. What is the suggested inaccuracy with the autopsy photos?
34. Much information was obtained from the film shot by an amateur photographer. What is his name?
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