



# The Assassination of John F Kennedy



A sceptical view by Peter Barrett, Canberra Skeptics

On 22 November 1963, United States President John F Kennedy was shot dead while in Dallas. Later that day, Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested and charged with the deaths of Kennedy and Dallas Police Officer John Tippit. Two days later, while being moved to a vehicle to transport him from the police station, where he was being held, to prison, Oswald was shot and killed by Jack Ruby. Those are the undisputed facts. Now the problems begin.

Newly sworn-in President Lyndon Johnson appointed a commission of inquiry, best known by the name of its head, Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren. The Warren Commission found that Oswald was the sole assassin, firing three shots from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository building. After the assassination, he left the murder weapon in the building, caught a bus and taxi home, collected a pistol, then headed out on foot. He was stopped by Tippit, whom he shot dead, then was arrested in a cinema. Ruby was found to have acted independently.

The Commission's findings were immediately disputed, and controversy has raged since. Kennedy's assassination has attracted conspiracy theorists since the early 1960s. Interest has been renewed by the movie "JFK" and more recently the rise of the Internet allowing theorists to promote their theories.

Most conspiracy theories involve either the Mafia or the CIA. The Mafia were allegedly concerned at investigations into them led by Attorney General Robert F Kennedy (President Kennedy's brother). The CIA, and other influential groups at the core of Big Government and Big Business, were allegedly concerned that President Kennedy wanted to reduce the USA's commitment to South Vietnam and cut military spending, which would reduce their power and influence.

The theories suggest that Oswald either was not the sole assassin, or was set up (a "patsy"), particularly as he wasn't a good shot. Many people have claimed that more than three shots were fired, including some from a location known as the Grassy Knoll, catching Kennedy in a cross fire. Most importantly, footage of the assassination shows Kennedy's head snap backwards with the final, fatal shot. This is taken to mean that this bullet must have been fired from in front of Kennedy (from the grassy knoll), not from behind (the Depository building). Theorists point to Ruby's connections to both the Mafia and the Dallas Police, suggesting that he was contracted to kill Oswald to prevent him talking.

Let's have a look at some of these claims. Space prevents too many topics being covered.

Why did Oswald want to shoot Kennedy? Oswald was a Marxist, and had lived for two years in the USSR. Unfortunately, he found life there worse than expected, and returned to the USA with his new wife. He retained his Marxist convictions, and was disgusted by American policy towards Cuba. He was also an aggressive, even violent, young man, who had owned a gun both while in the USSR and after his return to the USA. Killing Kennedy was to be his way of expressing his anger.

How accurate was Oswald with a rifle? Oswald qualified as a marksman while in the US Marines. With the telescopic sight on the murder weapon, he would've had little difficulty hitting Kennedy.

Was the murder weapon capable of firing three aimed shots in eight seconds? The murder weapon was a bolt action rifle. Oswald had to fire three shots and operate the bolt twice. Experts have shown this was easily possible. No other gunmen were required, either for accuracy or time. The Warren Commission concluded that Oswald fired his shots in just under six seconds, as a result of misinterpreting the footage on the Zapruder film. However, more recent examination of the film suggests that Oswald's first shot was sooner than the Warren Commission realised, giving him eight seconds to act.

How many shots were fired? A varying number of shots were reported by witnesses – anything from one to eight. However, about 85% of more than 200 people who witnessed the assassination reported hearing three shots when interviewed by Dallas Police on the afternoon of the assassination, and fewer than 10% reported four or more.

Why did Kennedy's head snap backwards if he was shot from behind? This is a physical response to being struck by bullets which pass through the body. It's well known to ballistics

experts, and has been demonstrated using cadavers or skulls filled with ballistic jelly. The body absorbs some of the bullet's energy, and body matter is pushed in the same direction as the bullet. This matter is forced out of the exit wound at high speed, and the body responds in accordance with Newton's Law about equal and opposite motion, by jerking in the opposite direction – back towards the source of the bullet.

Why did Oswald shoot at Kennedy when he was moving away at an angle? Wouldn't it have been easier to shoot Kennedy when he was approaching the Depository Building? Yes, Oswald would have had an easier shot. But Kennedy's Secret Service bodyguards would have been facing Oswald when he shot, and he would have been more easily spotted. His getaway would've been more difficult. At the time Oswald shot, none of Kennedy's bodyguards were paying attention to the Depository building.

How did the "magic bullet" cause so much damage and emerge almost intact? The "magic bullet", the second fired by Oswald and the first to hit Kennedy, caused seven wounds. It passed through Kennedy's upper torso from back to front, then the same with Texas Governor Connally, deflecting off a rib. It then passed through Connally's right arm, and had just enough energy to penetrate Connally's right thigh. Part of the "magic" claim is that the bullet must've changed course in the air to achieve this sequence of injuries. However, it's been demonstrated that Connally's right arm was in front of his body at the instant the bullet struck, placing it in the course of the bullet. The other part of the "magic" claim is its apparently excellent condition. Yet the bullet is noticeably flattened along its length. This is a consequence of it hitting one of Connolly's ribs. When bullets penetrate human bodies, their spin makes them tumble: by the time the bullet reached Connolly's rib cage, it would've been travelling side-on, which is why the bullet is flattened, not squashed.

Was Jack Ruby part of any conspiracy to kill Oswald? People have pointed to the fact that Ruby and Oswald had acquaintances in common, but there is no clear evidence that they had met or even knew of each other. Although Ruby may have contemplated shooting Oswald for a couple of days, he almost certainly acted on the spur of the moment. This is suggested by two factors. Firstly, Oswald's departure from the police station was delayed by 15 minutes because he wanted to change clothes. Ruby entered the room where he shot Oswald less than a minute before Oswald was brought into that room. In other words, if Oswald hadn't asked to change his clothes, he would've left the building well before Ruby entered it. Secondly, Ruby had walked to the police station after waiting in a queue at a Western Union office. If there'd been a few more people in the queue, or if service had been a little slower, Ruby would still have been too late, regardless of Oswald's delay. These two factors rule out the possibility that Ruby was involved in any conspiracy.

Was there any conspiracy to kill Kennedy? This is unlikely. When looking for a conspiracy, it's worth considering the consequences of it being discovered; uncovering the Watergate conspiracy took less than 3 years, and caused Richard Nixon's resignation. Additionally, the larger the conspiracy, the harder it is to keep secret. But in over 40 years, no credible conspiracies have been described, and there have been no death-bed confessions.

Was Kennedy going to pull the USA out of South Vietnam? Historians of Kennedy's presidency generally agree that Kennedy had given no firm indication of pulling out of South Vietnam, and was undecided about his policy on the growing Vietnam War. Kennedy's foreign policy was generally aggressively anti-Communist, whether in Cuba, Berlin or South Vietnam. Consequently, there was no reason for a CIA-Big Business conspiracy to want to eliminate Kennedy – he was on their side.

Conclusion. William of Ockham reminds us not to make explanations more complicated than they need to be. When applying Ockham's razor to the Kennedy assassination, we find that the most likely explanation is that Oswald acted alone. Other people may have had motives as well as Oswald, but the Oswald theory is simple and it fits all the evidence without any problems.

Recommended reading

Gerald Posner, *Case Closed*. London, Warner Books, 1994.