Camelot's Mystique

The American Public's Continued Fascination With the Kennedy Assassination

By LynDee Stephens
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Gloria Cox, university honors program director

Richard Wells, journalism department chairman
Amid the tract homes and two-car garages that peppered the American landscape in the decade following World War II, there was a controversy brewing, one that could not be contained by government or society. Though America in the 1950s appeared on the surface an ideal society full of hardworking men and happy housewives, it was then that the first strains of the tension that would split the nation over age, morals and race in the 1960s began.

It was in this climate, too, that a young, charismatic senator from Massachusetts began a rise to power that ended in his assassination in November 1963 and drew a nation into the mystique of a presidency that would hold widespread fascination for more than a quarter-century.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, on May 29, 1917. His parents, Joseph and Rose Kennedy, were a wealthy and politically active couple. Joe Kennedy was a United States ambassador with high hopes for the family's future. Rose, in particular, had watched her husband's rise in the international arena and had big plans for her nine children, of which John was the second boy (Patterson, 1).

John grew up on the family's New England estate as a young man with big ideas. He attended Princeton University briefly in the late 1930s before transferring to Harvard in 1936, where he would graduate in 1940. His honors thesis was about English Foreign Policy of the 1930s and was published in 1940 under the title "While England Slept (Patterson, 2)."

Upon graduation, the young man who would be president joined the U. S. Navy, shortly before the nation entered World War II. He rose quickly through the ranks, eventually gaining command of a boat. That boat, PT 109, was sunk by the Japanese in
1943. Though the young officer performed heroically in rescuing his crew during the incident, he aggravated an old back injury in the process and contracted malaria. He was discharged from the Navy in 1945 (Reeves, 17).

Kennedy returned to Massachusetts, where he ran for a Boston-area seat in the United States House of Representatives. He won, and was reelected in 1948 and 1950. As a congressman, Kennedy generally supported President Harry Truman's foreign policies (Reeves, 15).

A giant coup in Kennedy’s early political career was his victory over Senator Henry Cabot Lodge in 1952. The young man’s life, it seemed, was off to a brilliant start. A year after he was first elected to the Senate, he married Jacqueline Bouvier. The two made a striking couple and had nowhere to go but up (Reeves, 15).

A setback came during Kennedy’s time in the Senate, where he was considered somewhat ineffective because of long absences caused by back problems and his seeming reluctance to stand up to Senator Joseph McCarthy’s anti-communist ravings (Reeves, 15).

In 1956, Kennedy sought the democratic vice-presidential nomination, but lost his bid for the party’s nod, his first major political defeat. After such a disappointment, “Jack,” as he was known to family and friends, set his sights squarely on the Oval Office. In 1960, he won the much-contested race for the democratic presidential nomination and readied himself to face an uphill battle against Republican candidate Richard Nixon, the sitting vice president (Reeves, 16).

The campaign road was long and hard, but Kennedy had the good looks and charm that his opponent lacked and the energy to travel endlessly, meeting and
charming voters across the nation. He won the election in November 1960 by one of the narrowest margins in U.S. history.

Kennedy was the first Roman Catholic elected to the presidency in the United States, no small feat in 1960, when his chief opposition was the protestant public’s fear that the nation would be run by a puppet controlled by the Pope. It is widely speculated that the deciding factor in the 1960 election was the televised debates. Kennedy’s charm and eloquence came across the airwaves into thousands of American living rooms, contrasted with Nixon’s stiff, uncomfortable appearance (Reeves, 17).

John Kennedy won over the hearts of the American people before the election of 1960, but never again has a political candidate so divided the country. People either loved Kennedy or they hated him. There seemed to be no middle ground.

The president was the youngest to be elected to the office, full of bright ideas, fresh perspective and a desire to leave his mark on history. He was a powerful speaker, able to stir emotions in great numbers of people with his oration. One of the greatest examples of this talent was his inaugural address, delivered in January 1961. He challenged members of his generation to step up and take control of the nation and warned all other powers that America was a force to be reckoned with (Reeves, 22).

"The world is very different now. For Man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary belief for which our forebears fought is still at issue around the globe, the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.

We dare not forget today that we are heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans, born in this century, tempered
by war, disciplined by hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage, and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of these human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today, at home and around the world... .

Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us... .

Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors. Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce... .

All this will not be finished in the first 100 days. Nor will it be finished in the first 1,000 days, nor in the life of this administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin... .

And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.

My fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man... (MacArthur, 301-303)."

The Kennedys lived in the White House for 1,000 days in the early 1960s, but left their mark on history just the same. Jackie had three children, two born during her nearly three years as First Lady — Caroline, John junior, and Patrick. The youngest of the babies, Patrick, died as an infant in August 1963. Jackie was a fierce protector of her surviving children and their privacy, ordering a fence built around the presidential mansion to keep prying photographer’s lenses from targeting Caroline and “John-John" as they played on the grounds.

John Kennedy, meanwhile, faced many challenges in his short term as president. He ordered escalation of the United States’ involvement in Vietnam and became involved in a showdown with an island off the coast of Florida that was home to Russian nuclear weapons. At the height of the Cold War in October 1962, intelligence
reports delivered stories of Russian missile silos under construction on Cuba, which had been under the regime of dictator Fidel Castro since January 1959. The position of the silos was such that the Russian missiles could easily hit any major East Coast American city (Reeves, 368).

After the United States supported a failed invasion of the island nation at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, Kennedy was put in a position of staring down Castro and the Russian government. The other side blinked first, and the silos were removed within weeks (Reeves, 426).

Kennedy's biggest success during his short term of office was the inception of the Peace Corps, a service organization that sent Americans, mostly students, to offer aid to less-developed Third World nations. Though Kennedy devised the plans for important social programs, including Medicare and the Civil Rights Acts, he could not get them through a Congress with which he was perpetually at odds (Reeves, 69).

By the second half of 1963, the young president had turned his attention to his popularity and the election of 1964. Barry Goldwater was gaining support across the country, but especially in key areas. Kennedy realized that there were serious divisions in the Democratic Party in Texas, which held 32 electoral votes and often was in a position to decide presidential elections, and planned a sweep through the state for late November (Reeves, 660).

The president's trip to Texas was carefully mapped out. Though he had received death threats and warnings about his planned trip to the Lone Star State, it was nothing out of the ordinary and Kennedy proceeded.

"Now he would be obliged to spend three precious days on a tricky detour
among the rocks and shells of Texas politics. For Kennedy the excursion brought but one consolation: His wife was going to accompany him. Her decision came as a surprise, for she was not a company wife (Manchester, 7)." The two arrived in Houston on November 20, 1963.

The events of the trip will remain forever among the most tragic in U. S. history. Texas carries its own mystique, the largest state in the continental United States and one that has a deep cultural and political background. Kennedy's visit was highly anticipated in some areas and highly opposed in others.

The president was pleasantly surprised by the large turnout at his appearance in Houston, and moved on to an expectedly large crowd in San Antonio, which has a huge Catholic and minority population.

The couple flew into Meacham Field in Fort Worth on the evening of November 20, checked into the Texas Hotel and rested up for the breakfast and parade planned for the next day. As he slept that night, the young president was gratified by the trip's success, which boosted his confidence that he would win re-election the following fall. That would allow him another four years to press for passage of the social legislation that he felt would secure his place in history.

When John and Jacqueline Kennedy arrived at the University of Houston in late November, 1963, they were in search of the votes he would need to win re-election a little less than a year later. When Jackie left Dallas three days later, she was numb, in search of how to build a life for herself and her children without her husband.

The events of those three days in Texas were some of the most important of the Twentieth century. Students from around the world, in their brief study of United
States history, learn three things about Texas: it's big, it has long been the home of the U.S. oil industry, and President Kennedy was killed here.

Keith Shelton was the political reporter for The Dallas Times Herald in November 1963, and he traveled with the Kennedys throughout their final visit to the Lone Star State. Shelton was with the president as he faced surprisingly large crowds in Houston, was cheered by the Hispanic population in San Antonio and spoke at a breakfast at the Texas Hotel in Fort Worth. He was riding in the bus that followed Kennedy’s car through the motorcade in downtown Dallas and heard the crack of the gun that fired the bullet that would end the young president’s life.

In Houston, the Kennedys were welcomed by the University’s Young Democrats and then by another group of students who spoke in Arabic. Shelton watched as people walked through the receiving line, greeting the first families of Texas and the United States. He noticed that the president, at the end of the line, was “at a loss as to what to do (Shelton, 1).” As the president traveled through downtown Houston, Shelton observed “good crowds” on the “same route as [Kennedy] took in 1962 (Shelton, 1).” People stood along the edges of the road with signs, some welcoming the president, some insulting him. Shelton noticed two small children, each about four years old, holding a sign that read, “Welcome from two little Democrats.” A nearby woman was waving a placard that read “We need another ex-president (Shelton, 1).”

The president hit the freeway at 5 p.m. that day, headed for the airport to catch Air Force One up to San Antonio. He was in a good mood aboard the aircraft, pleased with the crowds in a city where he hadn’t expected much of a turnout (Shelton, 2).

The Kennedys arrived in San Antonio that night in time to attend a dinner-dance
at 8 p.m. Jackie chatted with the attendees, one of whom mentioned that it was too bad the couple didn’t have time to dedicate the newly-constructed JFK High School. She replied that that would be on the itinerary for the next trip to San Antonio, sometime early in 1964 (Shelton, 2).

Members of the League of United Latin American Citizens dropped in on the dinner in San Antonio. Jackie spoke to the crowd in Spanish at about 8:20 p.m. (Shelton, 2).

The couple forged on to Fort Worth, where they planned to spend two days campaigning. Shelton accompanied them, keeping track of everything that happened on the trip.

About 8:45 a.m. on November 21, the president addressed the crowds that had gathered outside the hotel. Jackie came down for the breakfast and read in Spanish. Shelton jotted observations of the speech among his notes: “Fair accent. Soft. Quiet (Shelton, 3).”

The president went to Will Rogers Coliseum to make a speech to Cowtown’s citizens. Shelton noted that the building was decorated with “red, white, and blue bunting,” and that there was an “integrated audience (Shelton, 3).” The room was filled to capacity, barely holding the 2,500 people who had turned out to hear the president. “More watched on closed circuit (Shelton, 3).” Congressman Albert Thomas was on hand to stir greater support for the president and lauded Kennedy in his remarks.

“Thomas called JFK ‘Texas’ great friend, and I mean that in more ways than one.’ [He] added: ‘We’ll take him into our hearts again next November’ (Shelton, 3).” Kennedy got a standing ovation from the crowd in Fort Worth that day.
Kennedy had reason to be satisfied with the trip to Texas the morning of his last day on Earth. The crowds had been as big or bigger than expected and the reception he had gotten in each city was warm, for the most part. The future of the administration was looking up.

Shelton, battling a sinus infection, was at the hotel early that morning, not aware that he was about to be on the forefront of coverage of one of the biggest stories of the century. “The breakfast hall was filled at 7:40, more than an hour before the breakfast. The 79-piece Eastern Hills High School Band, Ronnie Martin, director, played. There was a five-piece combo, the Jimmy Rovitto combo (Shelton, 1).”

The head table was filled with a veritable who’s who of Fort Worth politics and society, including Monsignor Vincent Wolf, Mayor Pro Tempore and Mrs. Willard Barr, Congressman Jim Wright, Governor and Mrs. John Connally and the Vice President and Lady Bird Johnson (Shelton, 1).

“After ‘Hail to the Chief’ and ‘Texas, Our Texas,’ Jackie still was not present. The audience watched the head table eat. The choir sang ‘The Eyes of Texas’ (Shelton, 1).” The first lady came into the room late, wearing a two-piece, pink wool suit with a black collar and a black ascot. “She was wearing the pink pill box hat that became so well known (Shelton, 1).”

Kennedy joked with the people present at the breakfast, who bobbed in and out of their seats like jack-in-the-boxes at the slightest provocation. “I know now why everyone in Fort Worth is so thin, having gotten up nine or 10 times,” he said (Shelton, 2).

“Aside from the fact that it was to be the last day of his life, November 22, 1963,
started out like many another day of campaigning, with glad handing, speaking, wooing crowds, waving and smiling (Shelton, 2).

Kennedy spoke to the people of Tarrant County on Vietnam, "which he said would collapse overnight without the U.S. (Shelton, 2)." In keeping with the traditions and folklore of Texas, Kennedy was presented with a cowboy hat. "I'll put it on in the White House Monday," he said. "If you'll come up, you'll have a chance to see it." The president and the First Lady were also presented with cowboy boots that morning (Shelton, 2).

Pressing on toward his appointments that afternoon in Dallas, the president climbed into a car and headed for Carswell Air Force Base on Fort Worth's West Side. "The motorcade passed a drive-in showing 'The Man With the X-Ray Eyes' and 'One Foot in Hell.' The flight time to Dallas was eight minutes. The planes lifted off at 11:50 (Shelton, 3)."

In Dallas, Kennedy's motorcade ventured through the heart of the city on a crisp fall afternoon. "Seeing a sign held by some teen-aged girls, Kennedy ordered the motorcade to stop at Lomo Alto. 'Please stop and shake our hands,' the sign said. The president did (Shelton, 3)."

The crowd in Dallas, even with the population of people who hated the president, was good. "People were hanging out of buildings, hanging from lampposts on Akard. The biggest crowd of all was in the middle of downtown. People were thick all the way to Houston Street (Shelton, 3)."

Shelton and the other reporters were following the president through town in a bus, chatting about things that would seem inconsequential in the coming moments.
"Then, at 12:30 precisely, three or four shots. There was a question in the minds of those in the bus right behind the lead vehicles in the motorcade. It was not how many shots were heard, but whether they were shots at all. They could have been fireworks or backfires (Shelton, 3)."

As the horrified reporters in the bus and the citizens of Dallas on the street watched in a confused haze, the car carrying the president bolted for the freeway. "Immediately it was clear that they were shots (Shelton, 3)."

The dreams the American people had invested in the Kennedy administration died with the handsome young leader at 1:18 p.m. that day. Doctors at Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas announced that Kennedy was dead.

"It had a lot of elements to it," Shelton said of the assassination in January 1999. "It was a major change in American History. What happened under Johnson was different than what would've happened under Kennedy.

For better or worse, the world would change after that day. November 22, 1963 was the end of an era of elegance and honor in America. "Camelot," as the administration was later dubbed by Jackie, was no more.

"The Kennedys were attractive people, bright people, were going to do great things," Shelton said. "Kennedy didn't really have a chance to do much. There was great promise in the Kennedys and that promise was snuffed out."

Dr. John Mark Dempsey, a member of the University of North Texas' journalism faculty, was nine years old on that fateful November day and holds very different memories of the events of November 22 and the ensuing weeks. In an interview in his office at the University of North Texas in March, he recalled the mood of the morning
and how it deteriorated with the events of the early afternoon.

“It was a school day,” he said, reclining in a chair in his office. “My school was right across the street from my house, so I went home for lunch every day. My mother always watched “Days of Our Lives” at 12:30. I remember I was standing next to the space heater in the living room and right after the show came on they broke in with a news bulletin.

“Cronkite came on and said there had been shots fired at the president’s motorcade in Dallas,” he continued. “My mother came around the corner and kind of gasped. I went back to school and told the teacher and I remember that she didn’t believe me. She said something like, ‘You heard wrong,’ or, ‘You must have been mistaken.’”

Dempsey said he recalls that the school day went on as usual that afternoon. “I don’t even know that we had a public address system in that school,” he said. “The flagpole was right outside our classroom window, and a little after 1 p.m., I noticed that the principal went out there and lowered the flag to half-staff. That was how I knew he had died.”

The students were dismissed early in the wake of national tragedy, Dempsey said, but it was then that his recollection of the events following Kennedy’s death parted company with popular history. “I remember some people joking around about it on the playground,” he said. “It’s funny, when you live through something that becomes history and you see the way it’s represented years later and that’s not the way you remember it.”

That’s not, Dempsey said, to say that he doesn’t remember what happened —
just the opposite. "I think one reason people are still so fascinated with that particular event is that it's something, for people who were young, that takes you back to being nine years old again. I remember everything that happened that day so clearly. Not many events can do that."

Dempsey said he's watched the newsreels that depict the assassination as an event that brought the country to its knees, but that's not the way he remembers it. "That's the great thing about this country," he said. "Something like that might have crippled other nations, but here, Johnson took over and life went on. People talked about it a lot, but it was like any other big news event that came up in conversation a lot. Life went on. I remember having a hard time getting to sleep and staying asleep that night, but that was it."

While he said he knows there were people who were greatly affected by the assassination, Dempsey said he didn't know anyone who was that upset over it. "Kennedy represented hope for the future in a way that no one had," he said. "He was a glamorous figure and there was the aspect of the promise that was cut short. A lot of people think things would have been different if Kennedy had lived. When anybody is cut down in their prime like that, the legend goes on — look at Marylin Monroe, Hendrix — when a glamorous, famous person dies young, especially violently, it's hard for people to let go."

Another thing Dempsey said has been over-analyzed is Kennedy's popularity ratings at the time of his death, on which there are conflicting reports — some nostalgists recall him as beloved the world over; other remember that he was hardly the most popular president America has ever had.
“I don’t know what his numbers were like when he came to Dallas that week,” Dempsey said. “He probably wasn’t as popular as Clinton is now, but I have no doubt that he would have been reelected. It used to be that we held the president, whoever he was, in much higher regard than we do now and Kennedy benefited from that as all presidents did then.”

Though Kennedy was a Democrat, a liberal in 1963 would not hold the same political views as a liberal today. “Kennedy was really quite conservative by today’s standards,” Dempsey said. “When people first heard he had been shot, given Dallas’ reputation as a conservative town, they assumed it was some right-wing lunatic who shot him. Everyone was surprised when Oswald was caught and it turned out to be a left-wing nut, a communist, who was the gunman.”

Kennedy seemed to have a personal connection with the American people, Dempsey said. “He was a lot like Reagan in the sense that he gave people personal confidence about what was going to happen in the future. He was inspiring. That was a great generation of people — they fought World War II and didn’t think there was anything they couldn’t do. For Kennedy to say there would be a man on the moon by 1970 — that was a bold statement. He believed we could do it, though, and that made other people believe that we could, too. I was nine years old and he made me optimistic about what would happen in the future.”

Dempsey has a unique family connection to the events that followed Kennedy’s death. Jack Ruby, the Dallas nightclub owner with a shady background who shot Lee Harvey Oswald in front of the television cameras, was tried for his crime. Dempsey’s uncle was the jury foreman in the case.
“I think that’s part of why people have a hard time letting go of the Kennedy thing — that Oswald was never tried,” Dempsey said. “There was no closure there. With Ruby, at least there was a trial. My uncle kept a sort of journal during the trial and I have that. I also have letters people sent to him and my aunt after the verdict. Some of the letters were supportive and some were really nasty, but they kept them. I’m working on putting that stuff, along with interviews with the surviving jurors, into a book.”

Dempsey said he thinks the fact that Oswald was never tried for his crime, coupled with the fact that he was killed violently by a man with ties to organized crime, helps perpetuate the conspiracy theories that surround the assassination. “I think that’s definitely part of it,” he said. “They feed off of each other. I do think that even if there had been a trial and Oswald had been found guilty and put in prison, there would still be the theories, though. There’s a market for it out there and [economic theory states that] the market will be satisfied.”

Though he acknowledges the theories, Dempsey, like Shelton, doesn’t believe in any of them. “I think there are people who seriously believe this,” Dempsey said. “I’d be a lot quicker to listen to someone who carries otherwise normal views of the world and this is the only thing like that that they believe in, but I don’t personally subscribe to any of this.”

There have been hundreds of books published on the assassination and the Kennedy family in the past 35 years. Shelton recalled that for a while, anything with Kennedy’s name on it was published — especially if it came out of Dallas.

“I can remember coming into the Times-Herald newsroom one day and no one
was working on anything for the newspaper,” he said. “They were all working on magazine articles and books. That was a way many of us made a lot of extra money then. Anything that came out of Dallas was almost guaranteed to get published.”

Dempsey offered up several other reasons for the continued fascination with and conspiracy theories surrounding Kennedy’s death. Like Shelton, he thinks a major factor in the conspiracy theory arena is the lack of willingness the public has to believe that one man could so cripple a nation. “People don’t want to think that one nut could pull something like that off,” he said. “It’s wrenching, when a president is killed that way. There hasn’t been anything quite like it that’s happened since.”

That’s not for lack of effort on the part of would-be assassins, though. There have been seven presidents who have succeeded or been elected to office in the 35 years since Kennedy was murdered. Of the seven, two have had attempts made on their lives — one of them twice. “Two people tried to shoot Gerald Ford,” Dempsey said. “Reagan was hit and very nearly died.”

Dempsey said the fascination with Kennedy’s death has been perpetuated in large part by Hollywood’s fascination with the debonair young president. Kennedy was rumored to have had an affair with screen siren Marilyn Monroe in the year before he died, a whisper that has been a fertile ground for the imaginations of Los Angeles screenwriters since the two of them died just a little more than a year apart. The affair has been included in recent films about the presidency, including The American President and My Fellow Americans, as well as movies about Monroe’s life, such as the HBO original Norma Jean and Marilyn.

On a grander scale, the Kennedy assassination and the conspiracy theories
surrounding it were the inspiration for Oliver Stone's *JFK*, based on the book *Crossfire* by Jim Marrs, a UNT journalism alumni.

The film, a four-hour epic starring Kevin Costner as New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, the litigator who tried for years to prove in the courts that Oswald was not the lone assassin, brought the murder and the theories home for a generation too young to have witnessed it. “For those who were alive at the time of the assassination, it's something you never forget,” Dempsey, who’s never seen Stone’s movie, said. “I heard it [*JFK*] was horrible. It brought the assassination to life for young people, though. Until then, it had always been something they had read about in a book. The movie made it real and perpetuated all of it — the fascination and the theories — to a whole new generation.”

The Warren Commission, appointed by Lyndon Johnson in one of his first acts as president, was assigned the task of investigating the assassination. After conducting hearings and different investigations over a period of several months in 1964, the commission issued a gargantuan report in September of that year that said, basically, that it was the commission’s finding that Kennedy was killed by 24-year-old Lee Harvey Oswald, who acted alone. The commission’s findings were also that Oswald was not involved in a conspiracy of any kind with Ruby. However, the investigation failed to establish Oswald’s motive for shooting the president (Patterson, 1).

The relative haste of the report and the widespread feeling on the part of the public that the commission had ignored a great deal of evidence, including the 8mm video of the assassination taken by Dallas dress manufacturer Abraham Zapruder, gave rise to a wealth of conspiracy theories that thrive even today.
The conspiracy theories that surround the assassination have helped to perpetuate the fascination with Kennedy’s life and presidency. There are too many theories on how the president died and why Oswald shot him to count, ranging from the outer-ring theories that Kennedy, recently diagnosed with Addison’s disease, staged his death in order to preserve the memory of what was an otherwise mediocre presidency or that Joe DiMaggio, angered with Kennedy’s treatment of Marilyn Monroe, had his Italian friends do away with the young leader, to the more widely accepted ideas that Castro or the CIA were somehow involved.

There are 10 major conspiracy theories surrounding the Kennedy assassination, almost all of them with books based on the theory in print or prominent subscribers or both. The theories, the reasons to believe or not believe them and any recent developments surrounding them, were chronicled in the November 1998 issue of Texas Monthly magazine. In the article, “The Conspiracy Theories,” reporters Pamela Colloff and Michael Hall explored both sides of the theories that have helped to perpetuate the Kennedy mystique, which has remained deeply ingrained in American culture for 35 years.

The most widely speculated theory surrounding the Kennedy assassination concerns the rest of the U.S. government — five separate theories outlined by Colloff and Hall, in fact, have to do with a government conspiracy to murder the president.

The first such theory speculates that the Central Intelligence Agency orchestrated the shooting because of threats Kennedy had made to the agency’s existence after the botched invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 put a heavy political load on the new president’s shoulders. It alleges that the agency was allowed to run amok under the
Eisenhower administration and that administrators were miffed when Kennedy tried to control the CIA’s covert operations.

The theory suggests that “Rogue agents, fearful that [Kennedy] would [“smash the CIA into a thousand pieces and scatter it to the four winds,” as he had threatened in 1961], struck first, either by placing CIA sharpshooters at Dealey Plaza or by enlisting former Marine and spy aspirant Lee Harvey Oswald to do the job (Colloff and Hall, 3).” It is believed by authors Mark Lane, who wrote Plausible Denial, John Newman, who wrote Oswald and the CIA, and Anthony Summers, who wrote Conspiracy (Collof and Hall, 3).

The fire surrounding the CIA theory is fueled by a few strange coincidences — Allen Dulles, the CIA director Kennedy fired after the Bay of Pigs, served on the Warren Commission; CIA Deputy Director Charles Cabell, also fired in 1961, was Dallas Mayor Earle Cabell’s brother; alleged Kennedy mistress Mary Pinchot Meyer was married to a CIA official and was murdered in 1964; and Richard Nixon, vice president under the Eisenhower administration who oversaw the original CIA plan to take Cuba back from Castro, was in Dallas on the day of the assassination (Coloff and Hall, 3).

The theory is plausible on four counts: The CIA had experience in ousting heads of state in Guatemala and Iran and knew how to get it done and keep it a secret; the agency had little congressional oversight at the time of the assassination and was full of overzealous agents whose modus operandi was “plausible deniability (Coloff and Hall, 4);” Oswald was once a Marine stationed at a U.S. Air Force Base in Japan that was at the time home to the largest CIA station in the Pacific; during the Warren Commission’s investigation, the CIA “withheld untold amounts of information, notably
that the agency and the mob had jointly tried to kill Castro (Collof and Hall, 4)."

Two things serve to discredit the theory: the fact that there is no evidence that Oswald was ever anything other than a fruitcake who, while at Atsugi in Japan, was a poor officer with erratic behavior and even once shot himself in the arm. Also, there is a belief that the CIA might have lied and cheated and performed covert operations without the knowledge or consent of the U.S. government at large, but attempting to kill the leader of an enemy state and assassinating the president of one’s own country are two very different things and there is no hard evidence to suggest that that was the case with Kennedy (Colloff and Hall, 5).

The second government conspiracy theory points the finger at the men assigned to protect the president — the Secret Service. The theory holds that the secret servicemen were pawns used by another government entity to make the assassination possible by providing loose security to allow the shooters a way to get to the president and by hijacking Kennedy’s corpse, allowing for things to be set in motion for a cover-up. Authors David Lifton, who penned Best Evidence, and Bonar Menninger, who wrote Mortal Error, are the leading perpetuators of the theory (Colloff and Hall, 14).

The Secret Service theory is supported by the facts that Secret Service agents were in Fort Worth drinking hard liquor in the early hours of Nov. 22 — at a beatnik club owned by an acquaintance of Jack Ruby’s — and that the two secret service agents set to cover the motorcade route rode in a covered limousine in front of the president’s car on the trip through Dallas that day (Collof and Hall, 14).

People who believe that the Secret Service was the instrumental factor in Kennedy’s death think so for five primary reasons: a motorcade that had been
scheduled during a visit to Miami on Nov. 18 was canceled because of right-wing threats that the president "would be shot from an office building with a high-powered rifle (Coloff and Hall, 14)."

In Dallas, however, few precautions were taken — buildings were left unsecured, lookouts were not posted and the president’s limousine had the protective bubble top off for the motorcade; the Secret Service chose the motorcade route, against regulations, that included a 120-degree turn, bringing Kennedy’s limousine to a slow crawl as it rounded the corner in front of the Book Depository while turning onto Elm Street; even though Dallas Police Chief Jesse Curry suggested that four motorcycles be stationed along each side of Kennedy’s car, Secret Service agents ordered only two cycles on each side — and told the officers to stay near the back bumper of the car; agent William Greer, Kennedy’s driver, briefly applied the brake instead of the gas after the first two shots were fired, causing the car to stop in front of the Depository seconds before the third and fatal shot was fired, according to Colloff and Hall’s findings; agents carrying the president’s corpse pushed their way past the medical examiner at Parkland, insisting that the autopsy on Kennedy would be done in Washington, D.C., even though state law required that it be performed in Dallas (Colloff and Hall, 15).

Those who think Oswald acted alone dismiss this theory on the basis that all 70 agents on detail that day couldn’t have been in on a conspiracy to kill the president and kept it a secret for 35 years and that Kennedy’s casket was never left alone on Air Force One, leaving no time for the body to be tampered with (Colloff and Hall, 15).

The third of the government theories lays the blame for the president’s murder with J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI. This is the most intricate of the government theories,
speculating that Hoover, knowing federal law required his retirement in two years and
knowing Kennedy was anxious to be rid of him, devised or allowed a plot to kill the
president, putting his old ally, LBJ, into the Oval Office. Johnson, after the assassination,
waived the mandatory federal retirement stipulation for Hoover, who ran the FBI until
he died in 1972 (Colloff and Hall, 12).

There are three scenarios to the FBI theory, depending upon which conspiracy
theorist is asked. The first alleges that Hoover knew of plans for the president to be
killed in Dallas and did nothing to stop Kennedy’s death, “taking an uncharacteristically
hands-off approach to investigating possible conspirators (Colloff and Hall, 12).” The
second scenario for Hoover’s involvement paints Oswald as an FBI informant ordered
to kill the president, and the third names him as the man who warned the FBI of plans
to kill Kennedy — then was framed for the murder and killed by informant Jack Ruby
before he could tell his story in court. This theory has been perpetuated by Mark North,
author of Act of Treason, and George O’Toole, author of The Assassination Tapes (Colloff
and Hall, 12).

Strange details involved in the theory are that Ruby was, in fact, an FBI
informant for a brief period in 1959; William Sullivan, the third most powerful man in
the bureau, who had headed the internal security aspects of the assassination
investigation, was shot in a hunting accident in 1977 — before he was to testify before
the House committee; as a child, Oswald’s favorite show was “I Led Three Lives,” a
series based on the life of an FBI counterspy (Colloff and Hall, 13).

Believers in the theory cite six facts they see as pertinent to the investigation of
the assassination: that the FBI had started a file on Oswald in 1960 or earlier, yet didn’t
notify the Secret Service that he worked in a building along the motorcade route; and that Oswald dropped off a note for agent James Hotsy, who had been investigating him, at the Dallas FBI office early on Nov. 22. Hotsy denied the note’s existence for 13 years after Oswald was killed, but later admitted he had received it. He said it warned him off bothering Marina Oswald, whom he had questioned twice in early November 1963 (Colloff and Hall, 13).

Other support for the theory came from Texas Attorney General Waggoner Carr, who prompted an emergency meeting of the Warren Commission in January 1964, telling them that Oswald was an undercover FBI agent; eyewitness accounts placed Oswald in New Orleans weeks before the murder, accepting envelopes from FBI agents; the FBI was the sole investigatory body for the Warren Commission and is said to have badgered witnesses, suppressed and destroyed evidence that painted the bureau in an unflattering light, and conducted a shoddy investigation, refusing to even look at Zapruder’s film of the day’s events; Hale Boggs, a Warren Commission member, said “Hoover lied his eyes out to the commission — on Oswald, on Ruby, on their friends, on the bullets, the gun, you name it (Colloff and Hall, 13).”

There are, however three facts that serve to disprove the FBI theory: The congressional investigators could never establish that Oswald was an informant for the FBI; Carr’s speculations were based on a Houston Post story, the main source of which later said he fabricated the whole thing; Hoover had extensive personal files on every American politician, so there are those who say he would have simply blackmailed Kennedy with the information in the files if he wanted to keep his job, making the elaborate assassination plot unnecessary (Coloff and Hall, 13).
The fourth theory on government involvement in the assassination targets the vice president — he was the person with the most to gain from Kennedy's death and it was no secret that he and Kennedy had differing political philosophies on some issues.

This theory, more than the others about the government, is based on rumor and innuendo. It contends that Johnson had lost hope of being elected to the presidency and had heard that Kennedy planned to drop him from the 1964 ticket, taking away even the title job of vice president. LBJ reacted, according to the theory, by stealing Kennedy's presidency on a trip to his native Texas, enlisting oilmen who feared losing the oil depletion allowance and warmongers who wanted to step up the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, which Johnson did after he took office (Colloff and Hall, 15).

The theory is believed by authors David Lifton, who wrote *The Texas Connection* and Harrison Edward Livingston, who wrote *Killing Kennedy*. Among the reasons that they subscribe to the theory are a few coincidences — Texas Governor John Connally was a longtime friend of Johnson's, and roomed in college with Dallas County District Attorney Henry Wade, who made the definitive case against Oswald before the news cameras. Also strange was LBJ's later appointment of Eugene Locke as ambassador to Vietnam. Locke was a Dallas attorney who had once worked for Marie Tippit, wife of Dallas Police Officer J.D. Tippit, who was shot by Oswald minutes after the assassination (Colloff and Hall, 15).

Other reasons to believe the theory are that on Nov. 24, 1963, Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach pushed for the creation of a federal investigatory commission, partly out of fear that the public would suspect Johnson, because historically, assassinations have been carried out by successors (Colloff and Hall, 16).
Johnson’s own actions after he took office also brought him under suspicion for the assassination. Soon after he took office, he pushed Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, initiating a period of increased involvement in Vietnam that lasted through part of the Nixon administration, until just before the war ended in 1975. Johnson also minutely controlled the investigation into his predecessor’s death, ordering certain assassination records sealed until 2039, well after every adult alive at the time of the assassination should be dead, and ordered Kennedy’s limousine to be refurbished, not entered into evidence as a crime scene. Johnson also handpicked each member of the Warren Commission, which answered to him (Colloff and Hall, 16).

Those who don’t subscribe to this theory see LBJ as ambitious, but not depraved and argue that to believe he ordered Kennedy’s murder requires complete suspension of knowledge about the man. They also argue, most importantly, that there is not one shred of evidence to support the theory. Recent release of audiotapes of conversations LBJ had with friends and advisors during his presidency show that he agonized over Vietnam and paint him as a man of great depth and conscience (Colloff and Hall, 16).

The final conspiracy theory that blames the government blames a theoretical “shadow government.” Believed wholeheartedly by New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, who tried to disproved the Warren Commission’s report for years, it was the shadow government theory that was the basis for the controversial Oliver Stone film *JFK* (Colloff and Hall, 2).

Garrison’s involvement in the case stems from his theory’s contention that New Orleans was where the assassins met to plot Kennedy’s demise. He hypothesized a government within the federal government, a sector more secretive than the CIA, a
cabal that set up the assassination of the too-popular and willful president, installed a puppet in the Oval Office and instituted a coverup that included tampering with the corpse, killing witnesses, and destroying and suppressing evidence. Garrison's theory summarizes all the other government theories, but blames the murder not on the individual, known agencies but a large network of rich and powerful industry kings, right-wing politicos, mobsters, spies, lowlifes and anti-Castro extremists (Colloff and Hall, 2).

There are many ins and outs to Garrison's theory, which put Oswald in with the CIA and had his wife, Marina, mocking him, telling him how attracted she was to the young, handsome president. The theory is based solely on this labrynthine network of people and ideas, posing more questions than it answers. Garrison contended, mostly, that the FBI and CIA did a shoddy job of investigating the assassination and the connections people involved in it had to each other and to the U.S. government.

Those who don't believe in this theory (and not many people, save Oliver Stone and author Jim Marrs, do) cite Garrison's history of mental problems as evidence that he was not to be taken seriously, an idea he managed to get into the pages of the New York Times. In 1969, Garrison ended his quest for the shadow government by putting businessman Clay Shaw on trial for murdering the president. It took the jury 45 minutes to dismiss Garrison's charges, substantiated by a mentally unstable man in a toga and a heroin addict. The Times called the trial "one of the most disgraceful chapters in the history of American jurisprudence (Colloff and Hall, 3)."

Unlike Garrison, though, Stone had the ability to reach the entire nation with his version of the theory. Despite the fact that JFK was historically inaccurate, it reached the
American public with the idea of a conspiracy in a way that nothing ever had. By late 1991, polls showed that 73 percent of the American public believed in a conspiracy to commit a murder that was almost three decades old. Congress, in response to an overwhelming demand, created an Assassination Records Review Board, which was in existence until September 1998 and managed, throughout the 1990s, to obtain more than four million pages of secret documents regarding the assassination, including the notes from Oswald’s interrogation at the Dallas Police Department and the personal papers of Warren Commission members. Nothing earth-shattering was recovered, but there are still many classified documents that will be released, according to the act that created the board, in 2017 — unless they are deemed unfit to be released by the sitting president (Colloff and Hall, 3).

Other theories for a conspiracy to kill Kennedy point the finger at the Mafia, the KGB, Castro, Cuban exiles and the Vietnamese.

The Mafia, it is argued, wanted the president dead because its members felt betrayed by him. They helped him win the 1960 election, it was rumored, by stuffing ballot boxes in Chicago. Florida organized crime is said to have aided the CIA in attempts made on Castro’s life. Instead of pledging their loyalty to the mob for all its help, though, John and Bobby Kennedy, who was his brother’s attorney general, declared an all-out war on organized crime in America (Colloff and Hall, 4).

While Congress was busy investigating the assassination in 1975 and ’76, three national mob bosses were killed — Sam Giancana was gunned down in his kitchen, Jimmy Hoffa disappeared (and hasn’t been found to this day), and Johnny Roselli was dismembered, stuffed in an oil drum and tossed into the water off the Florida coast
There is a multitude of evidence to suggest that the Mafia had Kennedy killed, including the reported confession of Santos Trafficante, who is said to have told his lawyer on his deathbed “Carlos [Marcello] f---ed up. We shouldn’t have gotten rid of Giovanni [the mafia’s name for JFK]. We should have killed Bobby (Colloff and Hall, 4).”

However, there is no hard evidence that the Mafia was involved in the assassination, and the purported confessions aren’t real evidence, considering the fact that police departments around the country get calls annually from depressed of disturbed people who want to confess to murdering the president (Colloff and Hall, 4).

The KGB theory, meanwhile, suggests that a humiliated Nikita Khrushchev, bitter over the U.S. victory in the standoff over the Cuban Missile Crisis, trained or set up Oswald, who lived in Russia from 1959 -’62, to get his revenge (Colloff and Hall, 9).

Oswald’s Russian-born wife and his stay in Russia, combined with his years in the American military and his communist leanings, serve as the basis for belief in this theory. However, there are many reasons to disbelieve it, the most compelling of which is the man’s unstable mental state. It seems odd that the KGB would pick him as an assassin, since nuclear retaliation was certain if the plot backfired and was uncovered by Kennedy. Recent release of the KGB file on Oswald revealed that the agency kept close tabs on him while he was in Russia because operative thought he was working for the CIA. It also revealed that after following Oswald on several hunting trips while he was in Russia, the KGB concluded that he was a poor marksman (Colloff and Hall, 9)

The Castro theory surmises that the Cuban dictator, fed up with the many CIA
attempts on his life, decided to strike back against Kennedy and was successful, thanks to a young American admirer named Lee Harvey Oswald who worked in a building along the motorcade route. Oswald's plans to move his family to Cuba and his admiration for Castro serve to back up the theory (Colloff and Hall, 10).

The flip side of the Castro theory is similar to that of the KGB theory — chiefly, that if anything went wrong and Oswald talked, nuclear retaliation against Castro would have been a certainty (Colloff and Hall, 10).

The ninth theory on the assassination is that it was carried out by Cuban Exiles, who hated Castro for taking their homeland and hated Kennedy more for what they saw as the president's allowance of Castro's continued reign, which they felt he could have ended if he hadn't withheld air support at the Bay of Pigs and canceled a later CIA-planned invasion of the island. This theory is thinly supported by reports that Oswald tried to infiltrate the exile movement and was in on a plot to kill the president, but refuted by the idea that he was unstable and wouldn't have been trusted by the exiles (Colloff and Hall, 7).

In 1994, however, Florence Martino, whose husband, John, was a prisoner of Castro's from 1959 to 1962 and was a member of the exiles' anti-Castro movement, said her husband, who died in 1975, told her about the assassination in advance. "Flo, they're going to kill him. They're going to kill him when he gets to Texas," she told writer Anthony Summers her husband said that morning. John then, she said, proceeded to stay on the phone all day with people who were in Texas though Florence said she didn't know who her husband was talking to (Colloff and Hall, 7).

The last major conspiracy theory surrounding Kennedy's death is that it was
orchestrated by the South Vietnamese president’s grieving family after he was shot in a U.S. backed coup on November 2, 1963, because he was negotiating with the communist North (Colloff and Hall, 8).

The theory is supported by the facts that the head of the Saigon military mission, Allen Dulles, who orchestrated the murders, was on the Warren Commission, and that Kennedy, who had approved the coup, did not approve the murders.

In fact, the president only wanted Diem evacuated from Saigon, possibly because he knew the man from his days as a senator, when Diem was exiled by Ho Chi Minh and sought refuge in a Catholic Seminary in New York. Diem’s widow, widely known as “the dragon lady of Saigon,” promised retaliation after her husband and brother-in-law were killed (Colloff and Hall, 8).

The sole idea that stands to disprove this theory, which Lyndon Johnson originally believed, is that if the South Vietnamese could orchestrate the assassination of the U.S. president, they should have been able to easily plan the murder of Ho Chi Minh and restore peace to their own nation (Colloff and Hall, 8.)

There are many other theories on how and why Kennedy was murdered that permeate American popular culture, an amazing testament to the longevity of the public’s interest in this man, his presidency, and his tragic death. The fascination extends even to the American media, which has reported faithfully on the tragedy at each milestone anniversary for 35 years. Indeed, the media curiosity about one of the biggest stories of the century and the public fascination with Kennedy seem to feed off of one another — the public remains interested because there is such a proliferation of information available, and the media compile more and more information and create
greater numbers of reports because there is such a compelling public interest.

The day of the assassination, Shelton, a political reporter for the *Dallas Times Herald*, was running a more than 100-degree temperature, ill with a bad sinus infection. Determined to cover the president’s visit to Texas, he pressed on, following Kennedy to Dallas (Stephens, 1).

Working from an advance copy of the speech Kennedy was to give that afternoon, Shelton had written the story on the speech and was simply waiting to ensure that nothing happened that would require him to change the article before it appeared in the paper that afternoon. Everything changed in the moments following noon, as shots were fired in Dealey Plaza and Shelton and the other horrified reporters watched the president’s limousine speed for the freeway. The limousine headed for Parkland Hospital, reaching speeds of up to 100 miles per hour on the freeway. The president would be pronounced dead at Parkland at 1:18 p.m (Stephens, 1).

Shelton went to the Trade Mart, located just blocks from the hospital. Kennedy had been scheduled to speak at the Trade Mart that day, and Shelton waited there until the president was pronounced dead.

Shelton ultimately wrote several stories that night — two from the perspectives and under the bylines of other people. The story he had filed about the speech Kennedy would have given was scrapped, and, as the political writer, Shelton wrote a “what-does-it-all-mean” story. Though he said he didn’t like the idea of having to do that at first, he was satisfied with the end result (Stephens, 2).

From the *Times Herald* photographer assigned to the story, who reacted quickly enough to snap a photo of Oswald’s rifle protruding from the sixth-floor window at the
Texas School Book Depository, Shelton got the point of view of the person who saw the gun sticking out the window. From the viewpoint of a Dallas Police Officer who was riding a motorcycle alongside the limousine in the motorcade and went home with part of the president’s head on his shirt, Shelton wrote that story (Stephens, 2).

By the time the dust had settled, the *Times Herald* had printed six extra editions. Shelton finally arrived home about 11 p.m., where his wife and brothers knew more about the assassination that he did, since he had gotten only the part of it that he was covering (Stephens, 2).

The assassination made headlines all over the world the next day and the investigation was grist for the news mill for years to come. Since Kennedy’s death, the American media have marked every major anniversary of the assassination with coverage not afforded the anniversary of any other assassination in the nation’s history.

On November 22, 1968, five years after Kennedy was killed, all three major network newscasts ran segments on the family’s activities that day and the thousands of mourners that filed past Kennedy’s grave at Arlington National Cemetery and wept at the loss of the young leader (Vanderbilt, 1).

Young reporter Sam Donaldson was in the field for ABC News that day, covering the family’s private mass and the cemetery visitors, as well as officiating a commentary on the Kennedy brothers, of which the second, Bobby Kennedy, had been lost that summer (Vanderbilt, 2).

The story was the last to air on the nightly newscast of all three networks, which in classic American media style, all tried to find an angle on the story someone else
didn’t have.

While ABC covered the basics and offered a commentary, CBS’s Walter Cronkite reported that Aristotle Onassis, the former first lady’s new love, had traveled to the U.S. to be with Jackie that day. Cronkite also had a segment on Dallas, including an interview with Texas School Book Depository manager Roy Trully, who said he didn’t blame himself for Kennedy’s death because he hired Oswald. CBS also offered viewers an update on Marina Oswald, who received $70,000 in insurance money upon her husband’s death, remarried and was living in the Dallas suburb of Richardson (Vanderbilt, 3).

NBC’s take on the fifth anniversary coverage was different still, sending reporter Chet Huntley to cover the memorial services and then featuring a Barbara Walters interview with Rose Kennedy, who talked about her fallen son’s politics and viewpoints (Vanderbilt, 4).

By the tenth anniversary of the assassination in November of 1973, the public and media interest in Kennedy hadn’t waned. Though ABC news was preempted by sports that night, CBS and NBC, among stories on the Watergate Committee and the oil crisis, ran reports of memorials of a simpler time and an honorable president (Vanderbilt, 5).

On CBS, Walter Cronkite and David Dick reported in the network’s fourth-from-last story of the evening on many facets of the decade that had followed the assassination in the lives of the people involved. Marina Oswald had married Ken Porter and was often in disagreement with Oswald’s mother about how Oswald’s children were being raised. The Kennedy family visited the grave site at Arlington
Cemetery early, the first of hundreds of mourners to pass JFK’s grave that day. The old news footage of Kennedy’s arrival at Love field was part of the report, as was the recollection of the day’s crowds by former aide Dave Powers. There was a segment on Oswald and his background, as well as an interview with Dallas Police Chief Jesse Curry and a story on the reminders in Dallas, including a shot of fallen police officer J.D. Tippit’s grave (Vanderbilt, 6).

On NBC that year, the last story was a John Chancellor and David Brinkley report on the family memorial and the memories of Kennedy that were still prevalent in American culture (Vanderbilt, 6).

In 1983, when 20 years had passed since the president’s death, all three networks had stories on the anniversary. Among coverage of the West German missile debate and the Lebanon and Beirut bombings, two of the networks put Kennedy last and one led with the story of the anniversary over all the current news of the day (Vanderbilt, 7).

On NBC, Tom Brokaw had the lead story with his coverage of the day’s services, which were attended by then-sitting President Ronald Reagan, who had had an attempt made on his life but survived aspiring assassin John Hinkley’s bullet (Vanderbilt, 10).

ABC, meanwhile, had a little more extensive coverage of the day, showing films and photos of the dead president at his inaugural address. Reporter Peter Jennings also addressed the emergence of the conspiracy theories in an interview with theorists Larry Harris and Sherry Gertler, as well as providing coverage of the Zapruder film, Oswald’s murder, and the Warren Report. Coverage was also given to the day’s events, both in Washington, D.C., and Dallas — Caroline Kennedy read the speech her father was
supposed to have given on the day of his death and Senator Edward Kennedy talked about his memories of his brother. John, Jr., it was noted, was working on his graduate studies in India that day. Memorial services in Dallas, it was noted, were to be the last, as the Kennedy family had requested that the services be moved to JFK's May birthday (Vanderbilt, 8).

On CBS, the coverage was shorter, also the last story. Dan rather reported on the family's attendance and conduct at services held that day (Vanderbilt, 9).

By the time 30 years had passed since the assassination, by historical standards, coverage of any kind would have been rare. With Kennedy and the fascination that perpetually surrounded him, the coverage was big, with stories in 1993 on all networks, two near the top of the newscast and one week-long series on the assassination (Vanderbilt, 11).

Among current stories on an American Airlines strike, the Brady Bill and Michigan doctor Jack Kevorkian, in trouble with the American Medical Association and the authorities for assisting terminally ill patients in committing suicide, ABC was the only network to place the story last in 1993, covering the designation of Dealey Plaza as a tragic National Historical Landmark and the Kennedy family's visit to the grave at Arlington Cemetery. Film from 1963 was shown of the assassination and the funeral (Vanderbilt, 12).

CBS placed the story almost at the top of the broadcast, running it as the second segment and before the first commercial break. It covered the designation of Dealey Plaza as a historic site and featured an interview with former first lady of Texas Nellie Connally in Dallas (Vanderbilt, 12).
NBC, meanwhile, covered the events at Dealey Plaza and the family memorial, placing the story just after the second commercial. The coverage also included film of what happened in Dallas that day, Oswald's murder and Johnson's first speech to the nation as president. Following the segment, there was a promotion for an NBC special week-long series titled "JFK: The week that shook the world (Vanderbilt, 13)."

Fall 1998 marked the 35th anniversary of JFK's death. The Dallas Morning News and The Fort Worth Star-Telegram ran special sections on the president's life, administration, and murder. Texas Monthly magazine ran a cover story on the assassination and the conspiracy theories. One television network ran a brief story on the anniversary at the end of the newscast.

Though ABC, CBS and CNN ignored the anniversary this time, NBC ran a short report on the family's activities for the day and reran NBC's archive footage of the reports in 1963 (Vanderbilt, 14).

The lack of network attention to the 35th November 22 since the assassination is not, however, an immediate sign that the Kennedy mystique has lost some of its bite. It was, after all, a halfway marking between the third and fourth decades since the president's death, the 40th anniversary of which will be observed in 2003, and only time will tell what the media will do with that anniversary, not to mention the half-century mark that will come around in 2013.

The fact that there will be reports on the anniversary of the president's death fifty years later is almost assured by the public fascination with the president and his abrupt and tragic end. Ask anyone old enough to remember, and chances are they can tell you right where they were and what they were doing that afternoon when they
heard the news that the president had been killed. Memories that powerful stay with people and the hunger for an answer to what caused such a tragedy, when there are as many doubts surrounding the investigation as there are in this case, may never be satisfied.

UNT Journalism teacher Shelton, who was with the Times Herald in 1963, said the Kennedy mystique didn’t die with the young president in Dallas that day. Indeed, as evidenced by the thousands of books and articles that followed Kennedy’s assassination, the image of perfection that surrounded the short administration only grew after the president was killed.

The term most Americans use to describe the Kennedy administration, “Camelot,” in reference to the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, wasn’t even coined until after that fateful trip to Texas. Jacqueline Kennedy, in an interview with journalist and author Theodore White after the assassination, likened the administration to Camelot because her late husband had a fascination with it (Shelton, 5).

History has judged the Kennedy administration kindly over the last 35 years. Whether that would have been the case if he had finished out his term will never be known, Shelton said. “I don’t think Kennedy could have ever gotten the Civil Rights Act passed,” he said in reference to the 1964 legislation that made widespread and far-reaching inroads into improving race relations. Though Kennedy authored the bill, his successor managed to railroad it through a reluctant Congress by claiming that passing it was the best way to honor the dead president’s memory. “All anybody had to do to have legislation passed was to say ‘This is what Kennedy would have wanted,’ ”
Shelton said.

Shelton covered four presidents for the *Times Herald* in the 1950s and 1960s and said he's not really sure what Kennedy's place among them would have been if he had lived. "I'm not sure he would have been a great president," Shelton said thoughtfully. "He did some great things ... I think his greatest achievement was the space program."

For the thousands of people around the world who keep Kennedy's memory alive, he was the century's greatest president. "There were a lot of different parts to it," Shelton said. "The history of the times was so emotional ... Television has a lot to do with the Kennedy mystique — it's an assassination that happened right on TV. It's one thing to hear about something like that, but it's another thing to see it."

Shelton acknowledged the similarities between the assassinations of Presidents Lincoln and Kennedy, almost 100 years apart and still the two most talked about assassinations in United States history. He reasoned that the emotional charge of both the 1860s and the 1960s plays a big part in the fascination that surrounds both murders. "The times were different," he said. "The Lincoln assassination came at a very emotional time, too. ... President McKinley was assassinated, too, but no one really cares and most people don't even know."

Shelton said the mystery and legend surrounding the Lone Star State probably plays a role in the Kennedy fascination. "Texas, particularly Dallas, has it's own mystique," he said. "There was the TV show in the 1980s ... Kennedy's death only added to that. McKinley was shot in Buffalo, but there's not national knowledge or curiosity about Buffalo."

Shelton pooh-poohed the conspiracy theories that have grown out of the
assassination — as a member of the newspaper staff whose photographer got a picture of Oswald’s rifle poking out of the open window at the Texas School Book Depository, he was not receptive to the various hypotheses on a government-orchestrated plot to get rid of the president. “Every anniversary it’s rehashed,” he said. “Anybody can drum up any kind of a drama. It’s difficult for the American public to accept that one punk kid can do that much damage to an entire nation.”

The ease with which Lee Harvey Oswald managed to shoot the president was another sore point for many, Shelton said. “There were thousands of places along that motorcade where anybody could have shot him. That’s why they don’t do motorcades like that anymore. There’s no way to keep a president safe unless you just lock him up in the White House and don’t let him out.”

It has been established since the assassination that Oswald was in the midst of severe mental and emotional problems, not the least of which was his failing marriage. Though Shelton believes that Oswald acted alone, he said he’s not sure the man was attempting to kill the president. “Oswald didn’t care who he shot,” Shelton said. “[Texas Governor] John Connally thought Oswald was trying to shoot him because when he was secretary of the Navy he had turned him down for something. Oswald fired three shots. One hit Connally in the arm and one hit the president in the head. It wasn’t all that great of marksmanship.”

Oswald’s subsequent murder at the hands of Ruby, a Dallas nightclub owner who reportedly had ties to the mafia, only served to feed the conspiracy theories, Shelton said. “People believe what they want to believe,” Shelton said. “It’s hard for them to accept the idea that there was no great motivation for Oswald; no political
advantage.

"Who profited most from Kennedy's assassination?" he continued. "It was mainly Johnson, but the idea that Johnson had him killed? That's just loony. Nobody had much to gain from his assassination. People pointed to organized crime, but if they were going to assassinate someone, it would have been Bobby Kennedy."

Shelton said the history of the United States since 1963 would have been drastically altered if Kennedy had lived. The United States' involvement in Vietnam, one of the events that defined the decade of the 1960s, would have been different under Kennedy than it was under Johnson, he said. "Johnson was just determined we were not going to get beaten in Vietnam, no matter what," he recalled. "Kennedy would have been a little more pragmatic — Kennedy understood history a little better than Johnson did."

Shelton said he thinks the fascination with the Kennedy assassination stems largely from the era in which it occurred. "For the generation that was adult in the 1960s what determined it as a major historical event was that you knew it at the time. There's something like it in every generation — Pearl Harbor, the Kennedy assassination, every generation has its event."

The assassination and the public interest surrounding it have perpetuated, as mentioned before, literally thousands of books, articles and films about or featuring Kennedy. "The content of published works may not be as revealing as the context. That is to say that a book such as 'John F. Kennedy and the Latvian People' may not be as revealing as the fact that such a work was written, published, and presumably read. ... In the early years after Dallas, everyone seemed to have something to say that could, if
ever so remotely, use the Kennedy name as a vehicle for publication (Toscano, 1)."

Kennedy’s image as a strong, willful, powerful leader, some say, might have been his undoing toward the end of his life, but those things are also what keeps his memory at the forefront of the public awareness more than a quarter-century after his death. “In American folklore there are abundant parallels to the Kennedy image: Washington (fortitude), Jackson (tenacity), Lincoln (doggedness), Theodore Roosevelt (audacity), Franklin Roosevelt (boldness) and Harry Truman (determination). From Valley Forge to the Alamo, from Charles Lindbergh to Neil Armstrong, there is woven into the American memory a celebration of these qualities and of those who have displayed them (Toscano, 21).”

The one thing that came out of the 1960s that the young president is still credited with politically, the Peace Corps, is something else that, for many years, kept the fire of his memory burning bright because it showed his faith in the young people of the United States. “Of all the actions or words of the Kennedy Administration, the Peace Corps is the one example which has become symbolic of the belief in John Kennedy’s capacity to inspire his fellow countrymen (Toscano, 31).”

As Shelton surmised, a large part of the fascination surrounding Kennedy and his death is the unanswered questions the assassination left. The young president had the ability to inspire people, to make them optimistic about the future in a way no president ever had. His youth, beauty and charisma all served to make his supporters feel that nothing bad could happen as long as Kennedy was in the White House.

When John was killed, the nation mourned a lost leader. Five years later, there was renewed hope in the American public when, in a year that would see the blood of
American teenagers shed on American soil by the bullets and clubs of police officers and National Guardsmen at protest rallies, Bobby Kennedy announced his candidacy for the office his brother had been so abruptly yanked from. In the summer of 1968, a new wound gaped open on the surface of the American consciousness when Bobby, too, fell victim to an assassin’s bullet. “It matters little which issue of the 1960s one chooses to examine, for in all there are examples of the continuing view that somehow our national life would have been different, most significantly better, if the Kennedy brothers had been allowed to live (Toscano, 47).”

In 1998, a one-hour documentary on the Zapruder Film was released on video, rehearsing the JFK assassination yet again for another generation. There was, with the third shot fired from Oswald’s rifle that crisp fall day, a huge wound opened on American humanity — one that will likely take another three decades to heal further. The unanswered questions left both by the abrupt end to the Kennedy administration and the lack of evidence offered by the Warren Commission has created a national debate over the death of the president that will continue far into the foreseeable future.

Kennedy’s assassination has permeated every avenue of American popular culture. From published historical volumes about the president’s life to questionable literary works on his personal life, to movies, television and music, the Kennedy mystique is deeply ingrained in American public life.

Aside from the films that focus on the assassination or the former first family, the references to the assassination and conspiracies are everywhere. In the summer of 1997, The Rock, an action movie about domestic terrorists taking over Alcatraz, was a huge box office draw. What I remember best about the movie? At the end, when the
main character has located a filmstrip he was ordered to find by an aging British spy who worked in the U.S. in the 1960's, he opens the canister, looks at the film and says to his wife “Hey, honey, you want to know who really killed Kennedy?” Of course, the credits roll before the question can be answered, which is what has happened to the American public over and over since the assassination. Everyone wants to know who really killed Kennedy. There was a similar reference in the 1998 summer blockbuster Armageddon, and I'm sure Bruce Willis won't be the last actor to ask that of a government official's character on the big screen.

Whether or not it really was Lee Harvey Oswald in the Book Depository with the rifle, “Who killed Kennedy?” is the question of the century, because no one can be completely sure.

Shelton, who was there that day, firmly believes it was Oswald, and reasons that a crime of passion doesn't have to have a motive. That may be, and in fact, probably is, the truth, but for the millions of people who weren't there that afternoon, it's not the answer. There are too many dangling ends, too many strange coincidences and too many people in a position to know who have alluded to a conspiracy for there to be a complete answer. There probably never will be.

If it was Oswald and he acted alone, all the evidence there is of that is already public knowledge, so, barring some breakthrough documents that have been buried somewhere for thirty-five years turning up unexpectedly, the answer will never get any plainer that it is today.

For the conspiracy theorists, there will always be enough of a shadow of doubt about Oswald's actions and motives to half-support their theories, which leaves them,
too, still searching for the ever-elusive culprit.

While I'm not sure I really believe any of the conspiracy theories, I'm also not sure that Oswald acted alone. The conspiracy theories, as separate units, counterbalance each other and don't work. If there was a conspiracy to kill Kennedy, based on the evidence available, it would have almost had to have been the entire United States government — Johnson, the FBI, the CIA and the Secret Service — working together to kill the president, but I don't see how that could have happened and not been confessed to or spoken about by someone involved in thirty-five years.

That, in a nutshell, is the driving force behind the Kennedy mystique: no one knows for sure why what happened in Dallas on November 22, 1963 did happen, except the people who perpetuated the events. If it was Oswald, he's dead and can't tell anyone, and if it was someone else, they're not saying.

As long as there is limited knowledge about who murdered the handsome young president, the public fascination with the young president, his life, and his murder will continue. Amid a technological revolution and two wars that have transformed the nation as we know it today from the one Kennedy knew, the intrigue surrounding his death has remained a constant for thirty-five years and will continue to fascinate each new generation until the day, if it ever comes, that the most widely followed political mystery of the twentieth century is, at last, solved.
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