

Jefferson Morley's keynote address to the 19th Annual Mary Ferrell - JFK Lancer Awards Banquet, Dallas, Texas, 22 Nov., 2013.

Toward the decisive clarification of JFK's death

After the House Select Committee on Assassinations issued its final report in June 1979, late night talk show host Johnny Carson announced its conclusion that President Kennedy had been

QUOTE killed by a conspiracy whose perpetrators could not be identified. ENDQUOTE

Carson paused with his impeccable timing and said.

"Next thing you know, they'll be telling us Hitler started World War II"

In that spirit of common sense and good humor. I welcome you to the 19th --and best JFK Lancer Conference.

I'm very happy to be here with my son Anthony. As an underpaid writer, I would be remiss if I did not exploit your undivided attention at the earliest possible moment to tell urge you to buy a copy of my book "Our Man in Mexico." Anthony has a table outside and he will gladly separate you from your money in exchange for a hardcover copy. It's a great read

My thanks to Kerry Kennedy McCarthy. I am humbled by your words and I promise you and your family I will strive to live up to them.

My warmest thanks to Deb for giving me the honor and the privilege to talk to you on this momentous occasion. The first time Deb invited me to speak at a Lancer conference I turned her down. I said, I didn't feel quite ready to talk publicly about my JFK reporting. She said "Oh that's OK, Jeff. All it takes is a little bit of courage."

She said it so nicely I didn't notice to the damage to my cowardly ego until about two days later. Some people like Deb because she's so sweet and so nice. I like her because she's so sweet and nice and tough.

It is no surprise to me to find that we have so many police officers, firefighters, veterans and teachers in attendance. You are all the proof we need that we are a citizens movement

You represents the best of our movement and a movement is what we are: a citizens movement that speaks up for historical truth. Unlike our friends who met in Dealey Plaza this afternoon we are not afraid or ashamed to talk about the causes of the President Kennedy's wrongful death. Like other movements that challenge entrenched governmental power, we are frequently dismissed or demonized our work distorted or ignored. And yet, as every opinion poll on the subject confirms, we retain our influence and the allegiance of the majority of Americans.

But, of course, our work is not done. And that is what I want to talk about. Where do you we go from here? Tens of millions of people around the world are remembering the death of President Kennedy in this city 50 years ago. The continuing challenge we face is to explain why JFK was killed. And this—let's face it—we have not done.

I have friends who tell me they know the answer to the question who killed JFK? I have tried to believe them. I would like to believe them. But I cannot. So I have sought a more credible story. Everywhere I go I meet people who thank me for my reporting and encourage me to continue. In my moments of discouragement, which I confess, are frequent, these kind words from strangers from all walks of life sustain me. So thank to you for coming to Dallas for the commemoration for a terrible national tragedy and thank you for listening tonight.

I want to reflect on how I got here, what I learned, and where we are headed. My goal is to bring us together in a worthy and ambitious endeavor. To achieve a decisive clarification of President Kennedy's assassination before November 22, 2014, before we meet again a year from now.

Is this possible? I think it is.

PAUSE

But before I tell you why, let me tell you where I was fifty years ago today,

I was about this big. I was sitting in Mrs. Whitman's kindergarten class at the Wilson School in suburban St. Louis near Washington University where my mother was a graduate student. Another teacher burst in the room and said the president had been shot, and she burst into tears. It was the first time I'd seen a grown up cry,

I don't remember much else about that time, except I have a vague

recollection of people gathered around our black and white Philco TV. I don't recall hearing the name John Kennedy or Lee Harvey Oswald or Jack Ruby although I know I must have.

I only remember knowing that something important had happened and I didn't know what it was. I think that insight was carved into my childish psyche where it remains to this day: something important happened and I still don't know what it was.

I grew up in an era of assassinations, though unlike some of you I was too young to have my heartbroken by then. I was ten years old when Martin Luther King was killed. I knew that was important because I had figured out that the Lutheran church down the street was named after him. A man named James Earl Ray was arrested.

Then Bobby Kennedy was killed. I didn't know much about him except he was President Kennedy's brother and he was cool and had long hair. A man named Sirhan Sirhan Sirhan was arrested.

When I was in high school Gerald Ford dodged a bullet from Squeaky Fromme and then another from Sarah Jane Moore.

I was getting interested in politics at the time and I simply assumed that when people ran for president, some of them would get shot, usually by someone with three names. The names were weird but assassination was normal.

It was so normal that when I majored in American history and wrote a senior thesis about Arthur Schlesinger's role in JFK's White House. I don't recall devoting a moment to thinking about the end of JFK's presidency. It just happened. It was normal.

My deeper understanding of assassination in America was born at the movies. I found myself gravitating to movies with assassination themes. The first was Alan Pakula's "The Parallax View," the original paranoid thriller in which the reporter who discovers the conspiracy is blamed for it. Pakula's next movie, "All the President's Men" had a more optimistic picture of the newspaper reporter's destiny and I knew what I wanted to do in life. Be an investigative reporter for the Washington Post.

As a college student I saw "Taxi Driver," in which Robert DeNiro plays a loner and a nut who takes a shot of Kennedy's-style candidate who mouths political banalities.

And it seemed to me that both types of scenarios—the conspiracy and the lone nut--were realistic and plausible. After all, "All the President's Men" was based on fact; Woodward and Bernstein had pierced the surface politics to find the conspiracy below.

But "Taxi Driver" rang true too. Not long after Bobby Kennedy was killed my family had moved to New York City, which was then a kind of feral place where irrational people and pointless violence were common, visible and menacing. I didn't doubt the reality of lone nuts because I had seen a few.

As I came of age and pursued my journalistic ambitions, what interested me was NOT the details of any of JFK's assassinations but the way that people made sense of it. The dichotomy of conspiracy and lone nut presented two different ways of thinking about political reality. It was my dichotomy that fascinated me and brought me back to JFK's assassination.

The year was 1983. I was a twenty five year old junior editor at Harper's magazine and I realized it was the 20th anniversary of JFK's assassination. I thought it would be interesting to get one of my favorite intellectuals, Christopher Lasch, to write about it Lasch was a bracing social critic and historian, combining both liberal and conservative impulses and I was curious about what he would say since I hadn't made up my mind. He agreed to write the piece and it appeared thirty years ago. In the piece, called "The Life of Kennedy's Death," Lasch argued that the lone gunman theory was implausible and that JFK had been killed by some kind of conspiracy. He didn't attempt to say who was responsible, merely that Americans should own up to the fact.

And I recall we got an indignant letter from New York Times columnist Anthony Lewis to which Lasch responded acerbically. I was intrigued that two intelligence writers who I admired could view reality so differently. What accounted for that?

In the years that followed I began delving the vast literature of JFK's assassination and several things impressed me. First of all, there weren't very many good books on the subject. Second, the two best contradicted each other.

William Manchester's Death of President reported without the shadow of a doubt that Lee Oswald had killed President Kennedy and Tink

Thompson's Six Seconds in Dallas, which showed that there were many good reasons to doubt that Oswald was solely guilty.

Third, I saw no way to resolve the contradiction, save to read more books, which just made my problem worse. As I read more and more—David Lifton and David Groden, Mark Lane and Priscilla McMillian, Mort Sahl and Arthur Schlesinger—I had the sensation that the lone nutters and the conspiracy theorists were like two kids on a teeter totter. One up, one down. The other up, the other down. Before long I had motion sickness and inclination to write about the JFK story.

And so I went about my business. In the 1980s, I devoted my reporting to the hottest story in Washington: the civil wars of Central America and especially the role of the U.S. government in supporting the military government of El Salvador. Many in Congress and the press said the U.S. should not support a government engaged in what can only be described as state-sponsored terrorism against a leftist guerrilla movement. Others said the U.S. government should support that government and seek to curb its human rights abuses.

In my reporting I discovered the role of the CIA and the Pentagon in organizing the system of military death squads that sought to liquidate the leftists and anybody else who opposed the government. Through interviews and declassified records I came to see the doctrinal and logistical underpinnings of the state terror system. The role of the State Department was to convince the world that the U.S. government was seeking to reduce the use of the terror which it sponsored.

I also learned of my naiveté. I thought that reporting the facts of the matter would change people's minds. I learned, to the contrary, that the reporting of these facts often lead people to deny that they were facts at all. I learned that people do not use facts to create their understanding of the way the world works. They use their understanding of the way the world works to create their facts.

To the extent I retained an interest in JFK, it was on the dynamics of public opinion, I wrote about the popular culture of the Kennedy assassination. In a piece for the Los Angeles Times in 1991, I depicted that JFK's assassination as a kind of Rorschach test of the American mind. How we make sense of November 22, 1963, I wrote, "is shaped, consciously and unconsciously, by our premises about the U.S. government and the way power is exercised in America.

"Those six seconds of gunfire in Dallas' Dealey Plaza serve as an

enigmatic ink blot into which we read our political concerns."

My premise was simple: Tell me what you think about the U.S. government and I'll tell you what think about JFK's assassination.

If you have a lot of confidence in the integrity and competence of the federal government and major media organizations, you would likely agree with the official theory of a lone gunman. If you suspect there fear the power of the government or believe there are hidden centers of power in America, you would likely suspect conspiracy.

This remains true today and I think it is why JFK's assassination is so relevant today. The JFK story is THE enduring indicator of our collective suspicions of the legitimacy of our national security government.

I'll return to this point in a minute.

[pause]

It wasn't until I joined the Washington Post in the fall of 1992 that I began to think of actually reporting on the assassination itself. The Post itself had taken the lead in attacking Oliver Stone's movie, even before it came out and hostility to the conspiratorial point of view ran high, although in newsroom discussions I could tell that there was no relation between vehemence and knowledge. Some of the loudest voices denouncing Stone came from people who, I could tell, knew less than I did about the JFK story. And I knew that I was no expert.

In the debate over Stone's movie, I felt had nothing to add. I could not possibly produce an interpretation of the crime as powerful as Stone's. My colleague George Lardner had already taken a hard look at Stone's facts. I had nothing to add there.

But when Congress passed the JFK Records Act in October 1992, I realized I had my opening. The law was the direct result of Stone's provocative vision. And let me just take a moment to thank him. Even his harshest critics should have the decency to acknowledge that he is personally responsible for rescuing the government's records of the early 1960s from custodians of secrecy and returning them to the American people. about who killed JFK. Thank you Oliver.

With the JFK Records Act, I could write about new information, not old theories.

I set my goals, narrowly and modest goals. I would stay away from theories and stick to facts. I wasn't looking for the proverbial "smoking gun," a fool's errand if there ever was one.

I was looking for a good story about the CIA. I wasn't going to figure out "Who killed JFK?" I was going to find someone who knew who killed JFK.

I didn't have a theory that the CIA was responsible. I didn't assume it. I didn't rule it out. I knew from my reporting in Central American that I could not dismiss the possibility of CIA involvement. An institution that would orchestrate the murder of thousands of civilian non-combatants and hide its actions behind a veil of secrecy, obfuscation and propaganda could be an institution capable of orchestrating or condoning the murder of a single man, even a president.

My method was time-tested. I was going to ask a variation on the basic question that Woodward and Bernstein asked in "All the President's Men." They asked: What did the president know and when did he know it?"

My question was, "What did the CIA know about Oswald and when did they know it?"

And that has been my subject ever since.

Answering these two questions led me to an interesting group of people who barely figured in the vast literature of the assassination before the 1990s

These questions led me to Jane Roman, the aide to CIA counterintelligence chief James Angleton. She knew about Oswald in November 1959 when she opened the CIA's first file on Oswald

She thought Oswald acted alone but revealed that certain CIA officers had a keen interest in Oswald just seven weeks before the assassination.

These questions led me to the story of Win Scott, the Mexico City station chief. He knew about Oswald in October 1963. He knew the CIA had deceived the Warren Commission and thought Oswald was instrument of a KGB conspiracy.

They led me here to Dallas where I interviewed Anne Goodpasture, Scott's proverbial right-hand man in 2005. She thought Oswald acted alone but admitted that a tape of Oswald—or of someone identifying himself as Oswald—had survived the assassination.

These questions lead me to John Whitten, the Mexico desk chief, who sought to investigate Oswald's Cuban connections after JFK's death. He knew about Oswald in October 1963. He thought Oswald acted alone but revealed a proper investigation had been thwarted by Angleton.

These questions lead me to George Joannides, the covert operations chief in Miami, whose assets among the Cuban exiles publicized Oswald's pro-Castro politics, and who resurfaced in the 1970s to stonewall Congress. We still don't know what or when he knew about Oswald because the CIA fought me in court for ten years to prevent me from see his reporting from 1963.

And my lawsuit seeking Joannides files lead to a sworn deposition from an Agency official who disclosed for the first time that the agency retains 1,100 assassination-related records that it had no intention of making public—in any form.

I reported as much in JFK Facts last May and the revelation is finally beginning to pierce the consciousness of the Washington press corps.

I'm glad to say that this week White House reporters asked the White House for comment on this trove of secrets. They didn't get an answer but at least they are starting to ask the right questions. Bout time.

Collectively, these stories built on the foundation of fact established first by Sylvia Meagher and Mary Ferrell, then reinforced by Gaeton Fonzi, John Newman, and Anthony Summers to give us a new understanding of the CIA and the accused assassin. To Sylvia, Mary and Gaeton, whom I never met, I can only say thank you. I couldn't have done it without you.

We can now say without fear of contradiction that senior CIA officers knew much more about the accused assassin in the weeks before JFK's assassination than the American public ever knew and that there was no unanimity among them about Oswald's sole guilt.

The CIA concealed this information even from colleagues;

The CIA lied about this knowledge to the Warren Commission and the public in 1964;

The CIA subverted the congressional investigation of 1978;

and that the CIA retains tens of thousands of pages related to JFK's assassination that it has never made public.

But what do these facts mean? When I recently shared these facts with a well-known one journalistic acquaintance he assured me that they were evidence that the CIA had "royally screwed up" but such "loose connections" did not prove a conspiracy.

I agreed they didn't prove a conspiracy. I suggested they proved that the CIA was still hiding something relevant to understanding the causes of the assassination. He pooh poohed the idea. I asked him if I could quote him. He said no.

I confess I felt one of those moments of discouragement. I guess I succumbed to my youthful hopes that facts might shape understanding.

They don't.

[pause]

"Why is this so important to you?" an NPR talk show host asked me earlier this week. And I confess I felt another moment of discouragement and irritation.

I said "Mister. You live in this country. Somebody killed the president in broad daylight and you and I really don't know who was responsible. The government and the national security agencies have told a story that there are many good reasons to doubt and that most of your fellow citizens don't believe.

"I know it happened a long time ago. But in case you hadn't noticed, the government and those national security agencies have the same credibility problem today.

Its the same government claimed, at least during the Bush administration, the right to torture its perceived enemies;

that still claims the right to violate the 14th amendment and assassinate U.S. citizens without due process,

that claims the right to violate the 4th Amendment by engaging in mass surveillance without a warrant;

that lied about its mass violation of the 4th amendment and continues to persecute journalists and whistleblowers who revealed the lie.

And the same government that has—let's face it--has royally screwed up urgent plans for universal health insurance.

"So the problem of who killed JFK is important to you and me both. It's a problem of constitutional and republican government and JFK suspicions are the indicator that it remains in jeopardy. You just prefer to not think about it, because the problem is so damned daunting. That's an impulse which I can well understand. But I just can't share. "

PAUSE

Actually, I didn't say that. I just wish I had.

I didn't say it because I didn't want to sound self-righteous and I wanted to say something constructive. And I tried but I wasn't so clear and concise. And afterwards I realized that the reason I was irritated, not by the question, but by my lack of a clear quick answer. I was, in short, hurting a sound bite.

The question, "Why does the JFK assassination still matter?" is intimately connected with the question of "What are we going to do about it?"

And in a world where public discourse is dominated by sound bites, we need some.

So what I'm going to do about it is suggest some better sound bites, not for the sake of being clever and being right ,but for the sake of advancing a specific and concrete agenda, for the sake of getting the goddamn JFK problem out of my life before I return to Dallas next year.

[PAUSE]

Is it possible? Like I said I think it is. I see signs of progress. Like John Kerry expressing serious doubts about the theory of a lone gunman. Like a White House reporter asking Jay Carney about the CIA's secret JFK records. Like a prime time Fox News special casting doubt on the official theory of a lone gunman. Like CNN picking up on Bill Kelly's important work on the Air Force One tapes. Like ten thousand people A DAY clicking on JFK Facts for the past week.

I know I know I could cite a dozen counterexamples but you know what? I'm not going to.

The way I look at it I'm going in to a street fight to defend the life and legacy of John F. Kennedy. I'm not going to beat myself up before it starts. I look out in this room and I see a lot of friends who've got my back. I look at the polls and I've got a majority of the American people behind me. I look at my speed dial, and I've got Oliver Stone AND Deb Conway by my side.

PAUSE

I kind of like my chances.

The way I look at it we have another years of sustained attention to the JFK problem. From now until the 50th anniversary of the Warren Report, people are going to be talking about JFK's assassination, about the limited coverage of this year's anniversary, about the enduring questions, about the secret records and popular disbelief. Of course, major news organizations, invested in the political status quo and unsettled by the disturbing historical record of the assassination are not going to pursue the story. But if you haven't noticed those organizations are losing their dominance to the disruptive forces in a networked world in which anyone has the means to reach a mass audience. So let's not forget we have the motive, the means, and the opportunity. I will continue to pursue the story. I know Bill Kelly will. I know Deb Conway will. I know Jim DiEugenio will. I know Russ Baker will. I know Joan Mellen will. Let's be a disruptive force and we can prevail.

So what do we do?

First, understand that we live in a new world, the world we are passing on to our young people. It is tempting to complain about the unfair coverage, the attempts to marginalize and demonize, the ridicule and the silence. But we need to understand such defensiveness and denial

as the last gasp of the old order. We have seen the Internet sweep away the power of entrenched interests in less than two decades. We can do the same.

The Internet has abolished the power of the gatekeepers who controlled the history of the JFK assassination for too long. The record of the JFK story is now available to everyone who wants it and we are in a much better position to influence the distribution of the real historical record than ever before. I checked my Web site an hour ago. Five hundred people a minute were visiting. That's more people than are in this room. Every minute.

If a young person wants to know the real history of JFK's assassination, where do they go? Not to the government: the National Archives Web site, which has a couple of hundred JFK records available online. Not to the private sector; the major news organizations have collections of stories but they don't have the records themselves. No, the student of the JFK assassination goes to civil society, to us, to the Mary Ferrell Foundation Web site, created by my friend Rex Bradford.

Second, we need a new mental paradigm. The Internet elevates our power and our mission. We are a research community but we can become much more. We can, in next year, become a civil society movement empowered by the Internet.

The internet has provided the means for ordinary people to attack and penetrate the overweening and illicit system of secrecy that controls information that rightly belongs to the people, and not just the history of Kennedy's assassination but many areas of our history. We need to study the origins and the tactics of Wikileaks and Edward Snowden to understand how we too can wield disruptive power against the self-interested narratives of the national security agencies.

Third, we need a new entrepreneurial attitude to drive our new status. We are Edward Snowden, the ordinary man who says enough is enough. And they are General Clapper, the once-powerful functionary discredited and disgraced by the exposure of his lies.

We are Netflix, streaming new information on demand into every household that wants it. They are Blockbuster, a legacy franchise waiting for customers to come to them, destined for bankruptcy though they don't know it yet.

Fourth, we need to direct our empowered and entrepreneurial

movement in actions to move public opinion. It is the only way to transcend and defeat the attempts to marginalize us. To complain is to lose. Let me say that again. To complain is to lose.

Did Martin Luther King spend his time saying the many racists who opposed him were cynical and immoral people imbued with unjustified superiority and indefensible arrogance? He could have. But he didn't often waste his breath. And our opponents in the struggle for public opinion are nowhere near as heinous as King's foes. He recognized that among his foes were a wide variety of people, some cynical, some fearful, some persuadable, and some hopeless. That's how I look at the partisans of the official theory.

He sought to persuade them by concrete actions that showed the world about the indefensible and hypocritical nature of their position. He sought to move them by appealing to the better angels of their character, even though some of them had no better angel. But others among his foes, who did have better angels or who wanted a better angel, could hear his message and not be threatened by it, could reconsider in the quiet of their conscience, and so, eventually, slowly, gradually but definitively, change their minds.

Fifth, we need to channel our newly empowered and entrepreneurial message into message into concrete action that can persuade and force change.

I propose two actions here.

We need a sustained and focused attack on the secrecy system that denies the people their history. In my lawsuit *Morley v. CIA*, my attorney, my counselor, my friend Jim Lesar has shown what one man, alone and unaided, can do. We need more Jim Lesars. We need to conceive and execute an ambitious legal strategy that aims to liberate the remains secret records of the JFK assassination--in the next year.

We need to come together with a single coherent alternative to the official theory that most people doubt for good reason. We need, I think, a civil society response to the Warren Commission. We need another report on the assassination of the president, not one compiled by four lawyers working at the mercy of the FBI and the CIA and the White House, but by civil society.

We need a crowd-sourced, data-mined, fact-checked, downloadable, account of how and why President Kennedy was killed and we need to

be able to publish it on multiple platforms, free of charge, on September 30, 2014.

That is a tall order. We are, by nature, a disputatious bunch. If we didn't have the courage of convictions we wouldn't be here. If we didn't like to argue, we would have given up by now. If we didn't defy consensus, we would be home reading Vince Bugliosi and mourning the death of Vincent Bugliosi. If we didn't think we were right all the time, we wouldn't take verbal shots at people who mostly share our beliefs. I've done that myself and its got to stop.

We have got to figure out a way to come together, to find common ground and that maybe our biggest challenge of all. To put aside our individual certainties in the service of a collective message that says to the American people: here is the story you have been waiting for. Here is the true story of why President Kennedy died in this city fifty years ago.

September 30 2014 is three hundred and eleven days from now.

Let's do what today's ceremony in Dealey Plaza did not: celebrate the life and legacy of John F. Kennedy.
And in the morning, let's get to work.

Thank you.

22 November 2013
amended 3 December 2013

JFK Observations:

The official theory asks us to believe, the crime solved in all of its important aspects on November 25, 1963 before the Warren Commission had even been formed.

Conspiracy theories originated in the circumstances of the crime, long before there were any conspiracy theories in circulation.

A lot of implausible JFK theories and the notion that one man alone was responsible is one of them.

Most JFK conspiracy theories are wrong and many are absurd. That

doesn't mean there wasn't a conspiracy.

The CIA retains more than 1,100 documents on JFK's assassination remains secret. The CIA says they are "not believed relevant"

If the still secret JFK records are exculpatory about the CIA's role in the events of 1963, they should be released. If they are not released, they cannot be considered exculpatory. .

<http://www.amazon.com/Our-Man-Mexico-Winston-History/dp/0700617906>

<http://jfkfacts.org/>

http://www.maryferrell.org/wiki/index.php/Main_Page
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