

50 Years of JFK Assassination Theories

The Week

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Depending on who you ask JFK was killed by the CIA, the KGB, his vice president, aliens or the Illuminati... Why three shots fired in Dallas still reverberate across America

It was all over in a few seconds, but the assassination of John F Kennedy on 22 November 1963 has generated five decades of painstaking, and for some unsatisfying, analysis.

Four years ago, a team of historians and retired Secret Service officers used the latest digital technology to analyse all the available film and still images taken in Dallas that day. Their conclusion: a "categorical confirmation" that JFK's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, acted alone. But as the 52nd anniversary of the president's killing approaches, the conspiracy theories that have sprung up around the event seem all but indestructible. Here are the topics that have triggered the most debate:



The 'magic bullet' theory: Oswald fired just three bullets in Dallas. But he killed JFK and badly wounded Governor John Connally who was sitting in the front seat of the limousine. The Warren Commission - the investigation into JFK's killing set up in 1963 - came up with the 'single-bullet theory' to explain how Oswald did so much damage with just three rounds. It posits that both men were hit by a single bullet which "entered JFK's upper back, exited his throat, and then struck Connally, breaking a rib and shattering his wrist, and finally coming to rest in his thigh," says the Mary Ferrell Foundation. Sceptics say the trajectory was fanciful and re-named it the 'magic bullet theory'. It's just one reason why conspiracy theorists think more than one shooter was involved.

The Grassy Knoll: Most JFK conspiracy theories pivot around the idea that Oswald wasn't acting alone. When the president was hit by the bullet that killed him, the motorcade was passing a grassy knoll on the north side of Elm Street. Newspaper photographs record that shortly after the shooting, police arrested three tramps found in a railroad car behind the knoll. Because the men were clean-shaven and well dressed there was speculation that they were CIA assassins rather than hobos.

The CIA: The idea that the assassination was a CIA plot sounds bizarre, but conspiracy theorists suggest the president's alleged comment that he wanted to "splinter the CIA into a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds" made him an agency target. Other theories suggest that one of the tramps (see above) was E Howard Hunt, a former CIA operative who was involved in the ill-fated Bay of Pigs operation to oust Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

The Mafia: Why would the mafia want JFK dead? Because his brother, Robert, was turning up the heat on organised crime. Robert was the US attorney general at the time and his "anti-mafia crusade" had led to a sharp increase in the number of prosecutions of senior mafia figures.

Lyndon B Johnson: In 2003, a Gallup poll revealed that 20 per cent of Americans believed Johnson had something to do with JFK's death. Theories include the vice president's "desire to become president, his need to cover up scandals, and his involvement with the FBI", says the Environmental Graffiti website.

Jackie Kennedy: One of the more far-fetched theories alleges that JFK's wife killed him herself. Could the president's wife have been a secret assassin? Some theorists claim that Jackie Kennedy hid a pistol in a nearby flower pot after the assassination. But, as the Daily Mirror notes, "many of those who make the claim seem to overlook the fact that she was being watched in an open limousine by thousands of onlookers".

Could JFK have survived?

For all the competing conspiracy theories, there is a remarkable acceptance of one point: President Kennedy did die on 22 November 1963. "Not even the crankiest crank argues that JFK is hiding out in a Boca pad with Jimmy Hoffa and DB Cooper," says Vanity Fair.

But on this point too there is room for disagreement on the details. Some believe that the president was still alive when he arrived at Parkland Hospital; others that he was dead before the final shot had been fired. Establishing the precise moment of his death is difficult, not only because of the chaos in the aftermath of the shooting, but also because there is no clear-cut definition of life and death in cases such as JFK's.

"The time [of death] was fixed at 1pm, as an approximation," the Warren Commission stated, "since it was impossible to determine the precise moment when life left the President."

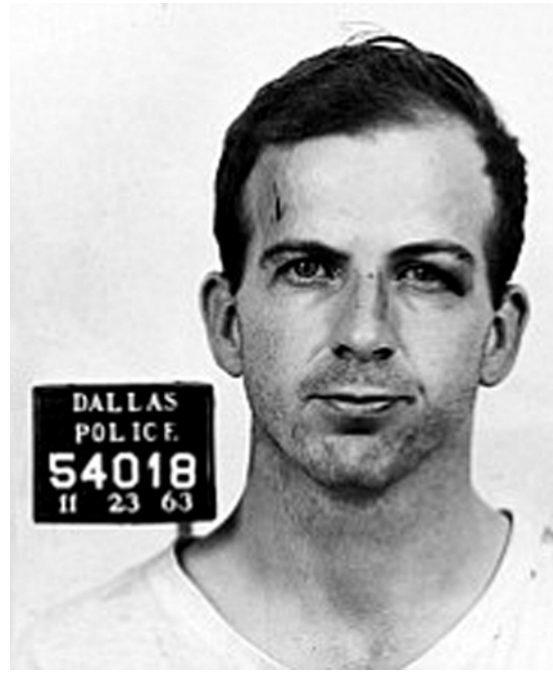
The report suggested that JFK could have survived the neck wound caused by the first shot, but not the brain damage that resulted from the second. "From a medical viewpoint, President Kennedy was alive when he arrived at Parkland Hospital," it said. "The doctors observed that he had a heart beat and was making some respiratory efforts. But his condition was hopeless, and the extraordinary efforts of the doctors to save him could not help but to have been unavailing."

What happened to Lee Harvey Oswald?

Less than an hour after Kennedy was assassinated, a police officer named JD Tippit stopped Oswald, who shot him at point blank range. Oswald, a 24-year-old former marine who had defected to the Soviet Union and returned to the US with a Russian wife the previous year, was later apprehended at a nearby cinema.

Two days later, when he was being transported from police headquarters to a more secure county jail, Oswald himself was shot. Jack Ruby, a nightclub owner, emerged from a crowd of police and reporters, who had gathered to see Oswald taken away, and fired a pistol into his stomach. Oswald was taken to Parkland Hospital and died just ten feet away from the room where Kennedy had died two days before.

Some believe Oswald was killed in order to stop him from revealing a larger conspiracy theory. Ruby claimed he was so outraged by the president's death that he had suffered "psychomotor epilepsy" and shot Oswald unconsciously. However, he was found guilty of murder with malice. Although he was initially sentenced to die, a court of appeal later ordered a retrial and he died of lung cancer in 1967 before it could be held.



Please answer the following questions in complete and detailed sentences.

- 1) Referencing the article, talk about two of the theories that have triggered the most debate over the years.
- 2) What are some of the issues (give two) surrounding JFK's treatment and eventual death after being shot?
- 3) Explain how the death of Lee Harvey Oswald contributed to the lasting conspiracy theories regarding JFK's death.