

The mother of all coverups

Forty years after the Warren Report, the official verdict on the Kennedy assassination, we now know the country's high and mighty were secretly among its biggest critics.

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By David Talbot

Sept. 15, 2004 | Once again, we find ourselves in the season of the official report: the 9/11 Commission Report, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence report, the Schlesinger inquiry on Abu Ghraib, among others. And once again the official version is under fire.

The 9/11 Report has been attacked for leaning over backward, in the spirit of bipartisan unanimity, to avoid pinning blame on the Bush administration for its casual attitude toward terrorist alerts before the calamity and for sidestepping the issue of Saudi involvement. But at least it has won a measure of public respect, due in large part to the vigilance of 9/11 victims' families.

The Senate report on the intelligence failures leading to the Iraq catastrophe has not fared as well, undoubtedly because it lacked the same public oversight. This report went to even greater extremes to keep Bush out of the cross hairs. As Thomas Powers wrote in the New York Review of Books, "No tyrannical father presiding over an intimidated household was ever tiptoed around with greater caution than is the figure of President George W. Bush in the [committee's] fat report."

And the Schlesinger report on Abu Ghraib has quickly earned itself an utterly contemptuous response, eliciting widespread outrage for giving Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and the Pentagon a sweeping pass on the reign of torture at the prison. While the world shuddered in horror at photographs and descriptions of the Abu Ghraib mayhem, James Schlesinger, the former defense secretary picked by Rumsfeld to chair the civilian commission, was considerably less agitated in his response. "Animal house," he blithely called the prison's chambers of violent perversity, a casual assessment that mirrored the forgiving views of Rush Limbaugh, who dismissed the scandal as a frat party gone wild.

So it is only appropriate, in this stormy season of the official version and its discontents, that we observe the 40th anniversary of the Warren Report - the mother of all such controversies. The vast, 26-

volume report was delivered by the commission chairman, Chief Justice Earl Warren, to President Johnson on Sept. 24, 1964. The Warren Report concluded that President Kennedy was the victim of a lone, unstable assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, who was himself, conveniently, gunned down just two days later in the Dallas police station by mob-connected hustler Jack Ruby. The Warren Commission -- itself the victim of massive fraud and manipulation by the FBI and CIA -- came under immediate fire from critics, with its report being denounced as a government coverup by a growing army of independent researchers. History has not been any kinder to the Warren Report, which has been derided and condemned by everyone from the House Select Committee on Assassinations -- the only other federal panel to exhaustively probe Kennedy's murder, and which found in 1979 that the president was the probable target of a conspiracy -- to Oliver Stone in his explosive 1991 film "JFK" to the History Channel, which routinely airs even the outer limits of conspiracy theories.

Four decades later, the Warren Report is widely regarded as a whitewash, with polls consistently showing that a majority of Americans reject the official version of Kennedy's death. (The Assassination Archives and Research Center will hold a conference to discuss the latest scholarship on the crime in Dallas and the Warren investigation from Sept. 17-19 in Washington. Information is available on its Web site.

But there is one sanctuary where the Warren Report is still stubbornly upheld and where its manifold critics can expect their own rough treatment: in the towers of the media elite. Fresh from assaulting Oliver Stone, not only for his film but for his very character (a media shark attack in which, I must confess, I too once engaged), the national press rushed to embrace Gerald Posner's bold 1993 defense of the Warren Report, "Case Closed," making it a bestseller. ("The most convincing explanation of the assassination," historian Robert Dallek called it in the Boston Globe.) And the 40th anniversary of JFK's murder last November sparked a new fusillade of anti-conspiracy sound and fury, with ABC's Peter Jennings making yet another network news attempt to silence the report's critics. Most of the press lords and pundits in the 1960s who allowed themselves to be convinced that the Warren Report was the correct version of what happened in Dallas -- whether because they genuinely believed it or because they thought it was for the good of the country -- are now dead or retired. But after buying the official version for so long, it seems the elite media institutions have too much invested in the Warren Report to change their minds now, even if they're under new editorial leadership.

One of the great ironies of history is that while the media elite was busily trying to shore up public confidence in the Warren Report, the political elites were privately confiding among themselves that the report was a travesty, a fairy tale for mass consumption. Presidents, White House aides, intelligence officials, senators, congressmen, even foreign leaders -- they all muttered darkly among themselves that Kennedy was killed by a conspiracy, a plot that a number of them suspected had roots in the U.S. government itself. (In truth, some high media dignitaries have also quietly shared their doubts about the official version. In 1993, CBS anchorman Dan Rather, who did much along with his network to enforce the party line on Dallas, confessed to Robert Tannenbaum, the former deputy chief counsel of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, "We really blew it on the Kennedy assassination.")

Thanks to tapes of White House conversations that have been released to the public in recent years, we now know that the man who appointed the Warren Commission -- President Lyndon Johnson -- did not believe its conclusions. On Sept. 18, 1964, the last day the panel met, commission member Sen. Richard Russell phoned Johnson, his old political protégé, to tell him he did not believe the single-bullet theory, the key to the commission's finding that Oswald acted alone. "I don't either," Johnson told him.

Johnson's theories about what really happened in Dallas shifted over the years. Soon after the assassination, Johnson was led to believe by the CIA that Kennedy might have been the victim of a Soviet conspiracy. Later his suspicions focused on Castro; during his long-running feud with Robert Kennedy, LBJ leaked a story to Washington columnist Drew Pearson suggesting the Kennedy brothers themselves were responsible for JFK's death by triggering a violent reaction from the Cuban leader with their "goddamned Murder Inc." plots to kill him.

In 1967, according to a report in the Washington Post, Johnson's suspicious gaze came to rest on the CIA. The newspaper quoted White House aide Marvin Watson as saying that Johnson was "now convinced" Kennedy was the victim of a plot and "that the CIA had something to do with this plot." Max Holland, who has just published a study of LBJ's views on Dallas, "The Kennedy Assassination Tapes," intriguingly concludes that Johnson remained haunted by the murder throughout his tenure in the White House. "It is virtually an article of faith among historians that the war in Vietnam was the overwhelming reason the president left office in 1969, a worn, bitter, and disillusioned man," writes Holland. "Yet the assassination-related tapes paint a more

nuanced portrait, one in which Johnson's view of the assassination weighed as heavily on him as did the war."

Critics of the Warren Report's lone-assassin conclusion were often stumped by defenders of the report with the question, "If there was a conspiracy, why didn't President Kennedy's own brother -- the attorney general of the United States, Robert Kennedy -- do anything about it?" It's true that, at least until shortly before his assassination in June 1968, Bobby Kennedy publicly supported the Warren Report. On March 25, during a presidential campaign rally at San Fernando Valley State College in California, Kennedy was dramatically confronted by a woman heckler, who called out, "We want to know who killed President Kennedy!" Kennedy responded by saying, "I stand by the Warren Commission Report." But at a later campaign appearance, days before his assassination, Bobby Kennedy said the opposite, according to his former press spokesman Frank Mankiewicz. When asked if he would reopen the investigation into his brother's death, he uttered a simple, one-word answer: "Yes." Mankiewicz recalls today, "I remember that I was stunned by the answer. It was either like he was suddenly blurting out the truth, or it was a way to shut down the questioning - you know, 'Yes, now let's move on.'"

His public statements on the Warren Report were obviously freighted with political and emotional -- and perhaps even security - concerns for Bobby Kennedy. But we have no doubt what his private opinion of the report was - as his biographer Evan Thomas wrote, Kennedy "regarded the Warren Commission as a public relations exercise to reassure the public." According to a variety of reports, Kennedy suspected a plot as soon as he heard his brother had been shot in Dallas. And as he made calls and inquiries in the hours and days after the assassination, he came to an ominous conclusion: JFK was the victim of a domestic political conspiracy.

In a remarkable passage in "One Hell of a Gamble," a widely praised 1997 history of the Cuban missile crisis based on declassified Soviet and U.S. government documents, historians Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali wrote that on Nov. 29, one week after the assassination, Bobby Kennedy dispatched a close family friend named William Walton to Moscow with a remarkable message for Georgi Bolshakov, the KGB agent he had come to trust during the nerve-wracking back-channel discussions sparked by the missile crisis. According to the historians, Walton told Bolshakov that Bobby and Jacqueline Kennedy believed "there was a large political conspiracy behind Oswald's rifle" and "that Dallas was the ideal location for such a crime." The Kennedys also sought to reassure the Soviets that despite Oswald's apparent

connections to the communist world, they believed President Kennedy had been killed by American enemies. This is a stunning account -- with the fallen president's brother and widow communicating their chilling suspicions to the preeminent world rival of the U.S. -- and it has not received nearly the public attention it deserves.

Both Khrushchev, who had been working with JFK to ease tensions between the superpowers, and his spy chief shared Kennedy's dark view of the assassination. KGB chairman reacted incredulously to the news that Oswald, a man whom his agency had closely monitored after he defected to the Soviet Union, was the culprit: "I thought that this man could not possibly be the mastermind of the crime." And according to Fursenko and Naftali, "Intelligence coming to Khrushchev in the weeks following the assassination seemed to confirm the theory that a right-wing conspiracy had killed Kennedy." This assessment was shared by the governments of Cuba, Mexico and France, where President DeGaulle, when briefed by a reporter on the lone-nut theory reacted with Gallic skepticism, laughing, "Vous me blaguez! [You're kidding me.] Cowboys and Indians!"

In the years after his brother's death, Bobby Kennedy was overwhelmed by grief. But the common perception that he found it too painful to focus on the assassination is belied by the fact that Kennedy maintained a searching curiosity about critics of the Warren Report, using surrogates like Mankiewicz, Walter Sheridan, Ed Guthman and John Siegenthaler to check out their work and dispatching his former aides to New Orleans to evaluate Jim Garrison's investigation. In fact Kennedy himself phoned New Orleans coroner Nicholas Chetta at his home after the death of key Garrison suspect David Ferrie to question Chetta about his autopsy report. And while Sheridan -- a trusted friend of Kennedy's who had worked closely with him on his Jimmy Hoffa investigation -- famously repudiated Garrison in a 1967 documentary for NBC, RFK apparently still kept ties to the Garrison camp. According to William Turner, a former FBI agent who worked as a Garrison investigator during the Kennedy case, in April 1968 he received a call in the New Orleans prosecutor's office from an RFK campaign aide named Richard Lubic. "He said, 'Bill, Bobby's going to go -- he's going to reopen the investigation after he wins.' I went in immediately and told Jim [Garrison]. He didn't seem surprised."

Bobby was not the only member of President Kennedy's inner circle who believed there was a conspiracy. Presidential aides Kenny O'Donnell and Dave Powers, key members of JFK's Irish Mafia, were in a trailing limousine in the Dallas motorcade. Both of them later told House Speaker Tip O'Neill that they heard two shots from behind the fence on

the grassy knoll. "That's not what you told the Warren Commission," a stunned O'Neill replied, according to his 1989 memoir, "Man of the House. "You're right," O'Donnell said. "I told the FBI what I had heard, but they said it couldn't have happened that way and that I must have been imagining things." So not wanting to "stir up more pain and trouble for the family," O'Donnell told the commission what the FBI wanted him to.

Speaking of the FBI, its deeply sinister strongman J. Edgar Hoover might have "lied his eyes out" to the Warren Commission, as panel member Hale Boggs, the Louisiana congressman, memorably told an aide, pressuring and maneuvering the commission to reach a lone-assassin verdict. But again, in private, Hoover told another story. The summer after the assassination, Hoover was relaxing at the Del Charro resort in California, which was owned by his friend, right-wing Texas oil tycoon Clint Murchison. Another Texas oil crony of Hoover's, Billy Byars Sr. -- the only man Hoover had called on the afternoon of Nov. 22, 1963, besides Robert Kennedy and the head of the Secret Service -- also was there. At one point, according to Anthony Summers, the invaluable prober of the dark side of American power, Byars' teenage son, Billy Jr., got up his nerve to ask Hoover the question, "Do you think Lee Harvey Oswald did it?" According to Byars, Hoover "stopped and looked at me for quite a long time. Then he said, 'If I told you what I really know, it would be very dangerous to this country. Our whole political system could be disrupted.'"

Blunt skepticism about the Warren Report was a bipartisan affair, with leaders on both sides of the aisle airily dismissing its conclusions. On a White House tape recording, President Nixon is heard telling aides that the Warren Report "was the greatest hoax that has ever been perpetuated." One of Nixon's top aides, White House chief of staff H.R. "Bob" Haldeman, shared his boss' skepticism. In his 1978 memoir, "The Ends of Power," Haldeman, who "had always been intrigued with the conflicting theories of the assassination," recalls that when the Nixon team moved into the White House in 1969, he felt that they finally "would be in a position to get all the facts." But Nixon, perhaps wary of where all those facts would lead, rejected Haldeman's suggestion.

According to Haldeman, Nixon did play the assassination card in a mysterious way against CIA director Richard Helms, long regarded by Warren Report critics to have some connection to the gunshots in Dallas. Seeking to pressure the CIA into helping him out of his Watergate mess, Nixon had Haldeman deliver this cryptic message -- apparently a threat -- to Helms: "The president asked me to tell you

this entire (Watergate) affair may be connected to the Bay of Pigs, and if it opens up, the Bay of Pigs may be blown." This prompted an explosive reaction from the spymaster: "Turmoil in the room, Helms gripping the arms of his chair leaning forward and shouting, 'The Bay of Pigs had nothing to do with this. I have no concern about the Bay of Pigs.'" Haldeman speculates that "Bay of Pigs" must have been Nixon's code for something related to the CIA, Castro and the Kennedy assassination. But whatever dark card Nixon had played, it worked. Haldeman reported back to his boss that the CIA director was now "very happy to be helpful."

Nixon was not willing to publicly reopen the box of assassination demons. But many of them began flying out when the Church Committee started investigating CIA abuses in the 1970s, including the unholy pact between the agency and the Mafia to eliminate Fidel Castro. (The bombshell headlines produced by the Church Committee would, in fact, lead to the formation of the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1977.)

Among those in Washington who were particularly curious about the revelations concerning the CIA and the Kennedy assassination was George H.W. Bush. As Kitty Kelley observes in her new book about the Bush family, while serving as the CIA director in the Ford administration, Bush fired off a series of memos in fall 1976, asking subordinates various questions about Oswald, Ruby, Helms and other figures tied to the assassination. "Years later, when [Bush] became president of the United States, he would deny making any attempt to review the agency files on the JFK assassination," writes Kelley in "The Family: The Real Story of the Bush Dynasty." "When he made this claim, he did not realize that the agency would release 18 documents (under the Freedom of Information Act) that showed he had indeed, as CIA director, requested information -- not once, but several times -- on a wide range of questions surrounding the Kennedy assassination."

One of the most aggressive investigators on the Church Committee was the young, ambitious Democratic senator from Colorado, Gary Hart, who along with Republican colleague Richard Schweiker began digging into the swampy murk of southern Florida in the early 1960s. Here was the steamy nursery for plots that drew together CIA saboteurs, Mafia cutthroats, anti-communist Cuban fanatics and the whole array of patriotic zealots who were determined to overthrow the government of Cuba -- the Iraq of its day. "The whole atmosphere at that time was so yeasty," says Hart today. "I don't think anybody, Helms or anybody, had control of the thing. There were people clandestinely meeting people, the Mafia connections, the friendships between the Mafia and CIA

agents, and this crazy Cuban exile community. There were more and more layers, and it was honeycombed with bizarre people. I don't think anybody knew everything that was going on. And I think the Kennedys were kind of racing to keep up with it all."

Schweiker's mind was blown by what he and Hart were digging up -- there is no other way to describe it. He was a moderate Republican from Pennsylvania and he would be chosen as a vice presidential running mate by Ronald Reagan in 1976 to bolster his challenge against President Jerry Ford. But Schweiker's faith in the American government seemed deeply shaken by his Kennedy probe, which convinced him "the fingerprints of intelligence" were all over Lee Harvey Oswald.

"Dick made a lot of statements inside the committee that were a lot more inflammatory than anything I ever said, in terms of his suspicions about who killed Kennedy," recalls Hart. "He would say, 'This is outrageous, we've got to reopen this.' He was a blowtorch."

Hart too concluded Kennedy was likely killed by a conspiracy, involving some feverish cabal from the swamps of anti-Castro zealotry. And when he ran for president in 1984, Hart says, whenever he was asked about the assassination, "My consistent response was, based on my Church Committee experience, there are sufficient doubts about the case to justify reopening the files of the CIA, particularly in its relationship to the Mafia." This was enough to blow other people's minds, says Hart, including remnants of the Mafia family of Florida godfather Santo Trafficante, who plays a key role in many JFK conspiracy theories. "[Journalist] Sy Hersh told me that he interviewed buddies of Trafficante, including his right-hand man who was still alive when Hersh wrote his book ('The Dark Side of Camelot'). He didn't put this in his book, but when my name came up, the guy laughed, he snorted and said, 'We don't think he's any better than the Kennedys.' Meaning they were keeping an eye on Hart? "At the very least. This was in the 1980s when I was running for president, saying I would reopen the (Kennedy) investigation. Anybody can draw their own conclusions."

Hart, of course, never made it to the White House. But another politician who had been deeply inspired by JFK did -- William Jefferson Clinton. And like perhaps every other man who moved into the White House following the Kennedy assassination, he too was curious about finding out the real story. "Where are the Kennedy files?" the young president reportedly asked soon after he went to work in the Oval Office.

And what about the other JFK from Massachusetts, who also met President Kennedy as a young man -- John F. Kerry? If he's elected in November, will he be tempted to launch an inquiry and try to find out what really happened to his hero in Dallas? Hart says he doubts it. "You almost had to go through it like I did with the Church Committee and get all the context. Otherwise, you have to be very careful about falling into the conspiracy category. I at least had some credentials to talk about it. But if Kerry were to bring it up, people would just say he's wacky, he's obsessive." As Hart observes, there are other ways to kill a leader these days -- you can assassinate his character.

And so 40 years after the Warren Report, with the country's political elite still wracked with suspicions about the Kennedy assassination, yet immobilized from doing anything about it by fears of being politically marginalized, and with the media elite continuing to disdain even the most serious journalistic inquiry, the crime seems frozen in place. It is now up to historians and scholars and authors to keep the spirit of inquiry alive.

For decades the only public critics of the Warren Report were a heroic and indomitable band of citizen-investigators -- including a crusading New York attorney, a small-town Texas newspaperman, a retired Washington civil servant, a Berkeley literature professor, a Los Angeles sign salesman, a Pittsburgh coroner -- all of whom refused to accept the fraud that was perpetrated on the American people. Undaunted by the media scorn that was heaped upon them, they devoted their lives to what powerful government officials and high-paid media mandarins should have been doing -- solving the most shocking crime against American democracy in the 20th century. Their names -- Mark Lane, Ray Marcus, Harold Weisberg, Sylvia Meagher, Vincent Salandria, Mary Ferrell, Penn Jones Jr., Cyril Wecht, Peter Dale Scott, Jim Lesar and Gaeton Fonzi, among others -- will find their honored place in American history. It is these everyday heroes, and their successors, whose best work will some day come to replace the heavy, counterfeit tomes of the Warren Report.

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About the writer  
David Talbot is Salon's founder and editor in chief.  
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