

# Conspiracy Theorists, and the Harm They Do

BY JAMES K. LAMBERT

THE MORE ONE EXPLORES HISTORY, THE MORE YOU can see how it does not line up with the ahistorical, wild stories that conspiracy theorists prefer to tell. “History,” as Former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski once put it, “is much more the product of chaos than of conspiracy,” with competing groups and divisions within groups often at odds with one another and unpredictable individuals frequently changing the course of human events for good and for ill. No event in the twentieth century did more to popularize conspiracy theories and confuse the general public than the assassination of President Kennedy, and it has served as a model for how to misrepresent the past ever since.

Lee Harvey Oswald, for example, was an oddball loner, raised by a conspiracy obsessed mother who seems to have been truly delusional. He was a man so reckless and impulsive that he defected to the Soviet Union and then tried to kill himself when they would not allow him to stay. This perpetual loser couldn’t hold down a job or keep his wife from repeatedly leaving him. These shortcomings, however, did not keep him from having visions of grandeur—he told his wife he would be “Prime Minister of America” someday. But this pattern of instability and incompetence doesn’t work for the yarns that conspiracy theorists weave together. They need Oswald to be a CIA agent, a KGB agent, a double agent, or perhaps an agent of a group so secret we do not even know its name. At the very least, they need him to be the fall guy (a patsy) for others, with whom he allegedly had a great deal of contact, so they could string him along and put him in the right place at the right time. The fact that Oswald barely hung out with anyone and was completely unreliable to be anywhere or do anything that others wanted from him presents no problem for conspiracy theorists. They just assume that we don’t know the real story about who Oswald “really” was and what he “really” did.

Jack Ruby was also an oddball. A strip club owner who loved John F. Kennedy so much he would carry a picture of the president in his pocket and kiss it, as one might kiss a photograph of a newborn baby. For conspiracy theorists, Ruby was a well connected Mafia hitman sent to silence Oswald before he could talk. In reality, Oswald had already spent many hours talking to the authorities. And Ruby, despite the fact that he had his gun on him as he always did, had previously walked right past Oswald at the police station and did nothing but say, “He looks like Paul Newman.” It was only later that Ruby decided on an impulse to shoot the assassin of his beloved President, completely forgetting that he had left his dog alone in his car.

Then there is Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, the Chairman of the President’s Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy (aka the Warren Commission). This former District Attorney and California Attorney General had many years of experience with murder cases and a stellar reputation as a man of impeccable integrity. In fact, he was so well respected and liked by the people of California that he is the only person to have been elected Governor three times in a row. He was also one of the most independent minded and powerful Chief Justices the nation has ever seen, overseeing the desegregation of schools and the removal of mandatory prayer in schools, among other dramatic and often unpopular decisions. There is no reason to think that such a man would risk his legacy by covering up the murder of any President, let alone one he was friendly with and seems to have admired. But conspiracy theorists need Warren to be the chief lackey in charge of the official cover up, and so that is what he becomes in their stories, along with the four hundred people who worked on the commission’s report and the countless others who came in contact with them. For the conspiracy theorists, these people are nothing more than nameless

henchmen who might as well be working for a super villain in a James Bond film—every one of them too cowardly or stupid to think for themselves. Before his death, Warren tried to point out the absurdity of such conspiracy fiction in his 1977 *Memoir*:

In the assassination of President Kennedy, there are no facts upon which to hypothesize a conspiracy. They simply do not exist in any of the investigations made by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Secret Service, the Central Intelligence Agency, or the Departments of State, Defense, and Justice. The last was headed by the late Robert F. Kennedy, brother of our assassinated President, who certainly wanted nothing short of the truth. In addition, the authorities of the state of Texas, of the city of Dallas, and law enforcement agencies of other cities throughout the country were anxious to be helpful in every possible way. All of this was supplemented by nine months of arduous work by our own staff of outstanding lawyers independent of all of these official agencies. And none of us could find any evidence of conspiracy. Every witness who could be found was examined, and it is revealing to note at this late date—nine years after the Commission Report was filed—that not a single contrary witness has been produced with convincing evidence. Practically all the Cabinet members of President Kennedy's administration, along with Director J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI and Chief James Rowley of the Secret Service, whose duty it was to protect the life of the Presi-

dent, testified that to their knowledge there was no sign of any conspiracy. To say now that these people, as well as the Commission, suppressed, neglected to unearth, or overlooked evidence of a conspiracy would be an indictment of the entire government of the United States. It would mean the whole structure was absolutely corrupt from top to bottom, with not one person of high or low rank willing to come forward to expose the villainy, in spite of the fact that the entire country bitterly mourned the death of its young President and such a praiseworthy deed could make one a national hero.

Now, 40 years later, when so many people in the government are too young to even remember President Kennedy's death, the criticism that Warren laid out has only sharpened because anyone who might have any information that might "crack the case" would have a huge incentive to share it. Think of the book and movie deals that would come to them, as well as the potential political career. Conspiracy theorists simply ignore the fact that personalities and motivations change in any organization over time. They prefer to think in terms of "the CIA," "the Government," etc., as if these were monolithic, eternal entities in their own right, whose goals and near absolute power never changes.

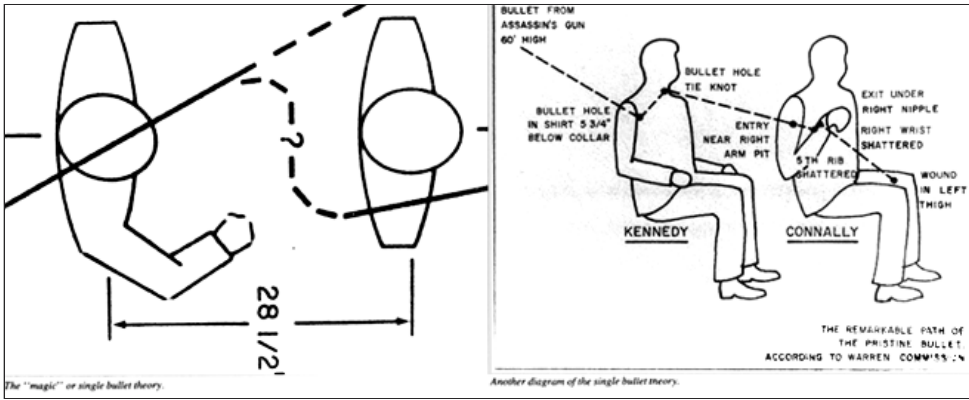
Conspiracy theorists' causal concern for reality and truth can be seen in nearly every claim they make. Consider the following five examples related to President Kennedy's assassination:



**The so-called magic or pristine bullet**—while it appears relatively undamaged from the side view, the bottom view shows considerable distortion that only makes sense if the bullet was rolling, end over end. Left—sideview.

Below—end view.  
National Archives no. CE 399 and FBI C1.





**These diagrams are presented as if they were taken from the Warren Commission** even though they completely misrepresent the Warren Commission's findings. From Robert Groden's book, *High Treason: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* (1989).



**The Warren Commission's findings are also grossly misrepresented** during the infamous "magic bullet" sequence in Oliver Stone's film *JFK*. From a screenshot of *JFK* (1991).



**By contrast, in Exhibit 903 from the Warren Commission's Final Report** the path of the bullet is roughly estimated with a metal rod to be a straight line. The rod is held by Arlen Specter, a lawyer working for the Commission who went on to be a U.S. Senator.

1. One of the most impactful scenes in Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK* is the courtroom presentation by Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) depicting the path of the "magic bullet" that passed through both President Kennedy and Governor Connally. This is the keystone in the bridge that Stone builds to conspiracyland and one of the most often repeated reasons why people do not believe the Warren Report. I agree that the so-called magic bullet is "One of the grossest lies ever forced on the American people," but it was not the Warren Commission that created this lie—it was conspiracy theorists.

One of the earliest JFK conspiracy theorists, Mark Lane, coined the term "magic bullet" in his 1966 book, *Rush to Judgement*. I first saw this misrepresentation of reality in a graphic (Top left) published in the 1989 printing of Robert Groden's book, *High Treason: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*.

Notice how this "remarkable path" is labeled in the lower right hand corner as "according to Warren Commission," suggesting that these drawings appeared in the original report. Similar graphics appear in the background of Stone's courtroom scene, which is no surprise, since both Lane and Groden were advisers on Stone's film.

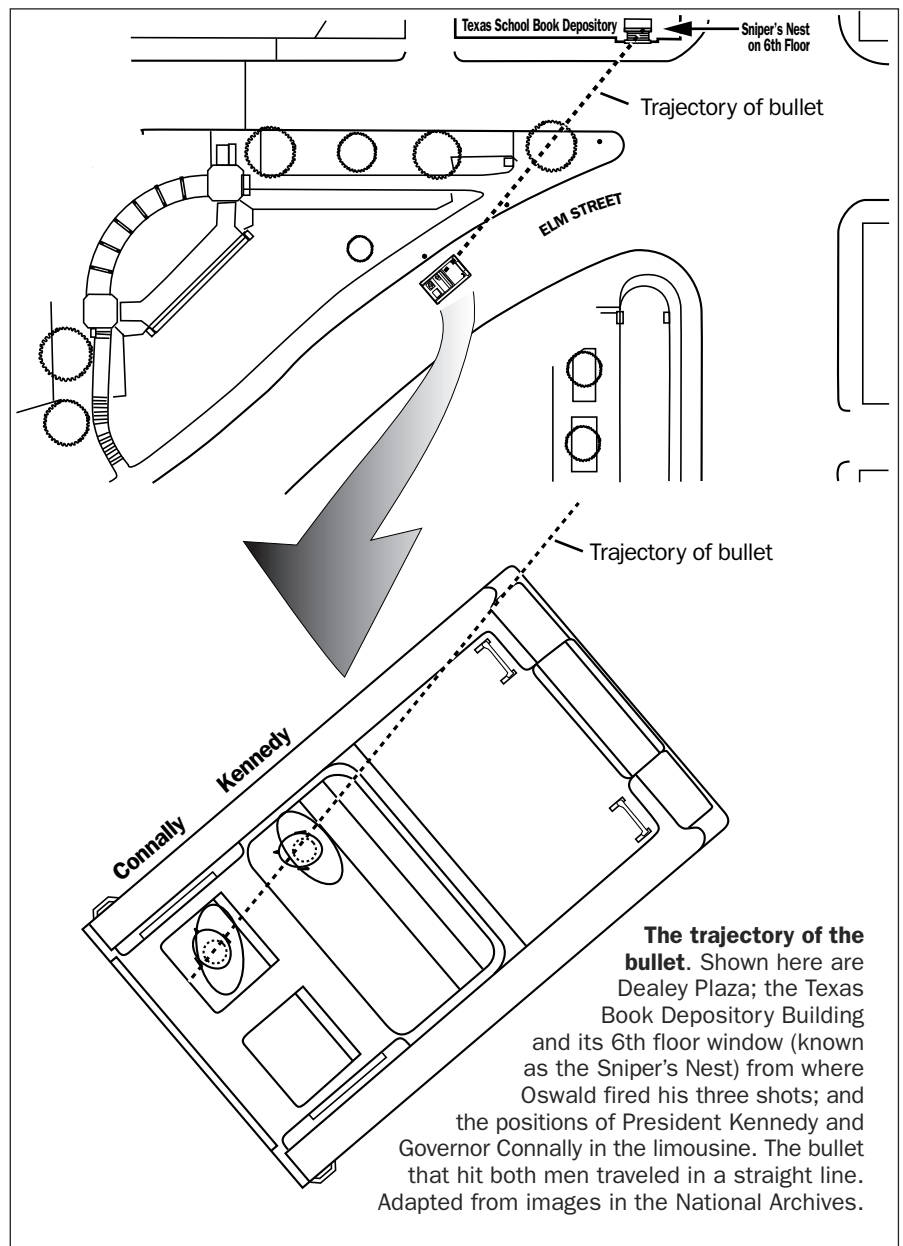
If the Warren Commission had claimed that this bullet needed to zig and zag to pass through these two men, then it would be foolish to believe them. However, the Warren Commission made no such claim. They said the bullet traveled in a straight line.

Stone's courtroom staging of the shooting and the phony graphics that nearly every JFK conspiracy theorist points to make you think that Kennedy and Connally were seated at the same height, as if they were in chairs of the same

size on a flat floor, facing the same direction. In reality, Connally was in a pull-down jump seat, set in from the side of the limo and lower than Kennedy's seat. Additionally, the car was traveling downhill to go under the railroad tracks at the triple underpass. To make matters worse, conspiracy theorists often make it seem as if Oswald was further to the President's right than he actually was and they ignore the fact that Connally turned toward the right when both men were hit. When you correctly position both men with the vehicle in its proper location on the road, you can see that no magic is required for a single bullet to pass through both of them.

There is yet another problem for the conspiracy theorists—reality keeps getting in their way. The entry wound on Connally's back was an oval, rather than a circle. This is because the bullet that struck him was tumbling end over end, through the air the way a bullet often does after it has passed through human flesh and exited back into open space. If Connally had been hit by a different bullet than the one that passed through Kennedy, there would not be an oval wound—unless you want to believe that this second gun malfunctioned in a very odd manner that just happened to make the bullet yaw.

The conspiracy theorists also have no good explanation for where all these other alleged bullets went. If one passed through Kennedy but did not hit Connally, who was the next person directly in the bullet's path, then what did it hit? If Kennedy was hit in the back and the neck and neither bullet passed through him, where did they go? His entire body was X-rayed at the autopsy. But the most important question of all is why did conspiracy theorists choose to make up this phony misrepresentation of what the Warren Commission found? Why have they repeated this for decades, with false graphics, public demonstrations, and a dramatic movie reenactment? If they had a substantive case to make against the Warren Commission, they would have made it, and they wouldn't need to grossly misrepresent what the Warren Commission actually found.



**2. Besides making up “facts,” conspiracy theorists like to fixate on actual details taken out of context.** I remember former Minnesota Governor, actor, and professional wrestler Jesse Ventura going on about the word “patsy” when I met him in 2003 at the 40th anniversary of the assassination in Dealey Plaza. Why did Oswald refer to himself as “just a patsy?” Why would he choose that word? The real question is why do conspiracy theorists never bother to look at or cite the full quote?

When reporters asked Oswald if he had killed the President, he replied, “No, they’ve taken me in because of the fact that I lived in the Soviet Union. I’m just a patsy.” The first sentence is key to understand what Oswald was actually claiming. He was not alluding to a vague, unknown group, he is pointing fingers at the Dallas Police and saying “they’ve taken me in because of the fact that I lived in the Soviet Union.” It is no different from if a Black man had been arrested and said, “they’ve taken me in because I’m Black. I’m just a patsy.” You wouldn’t conclude from this that he was suggesting a massive conspiracy set him up. You would understand that he was claiming the police were wrongfully targeting him out of bigotry.

Oswald was claiming that the police were wrongfully targeting him because he was a communist and the police were anti-communists. He was claiming to be innocent, which was a lie, but he was not claiming that any outside party or parties had set him up before the shooting took place or that he knew of any conspiracy to murder the President, as conspiracy theorists wish to imagine.

**3. Besides making things up and taking things out of context, conspiracy theorists downplay the weight of the evidence that was available to the Dallas Police and later investigations like the Warren Commission.** One frequently repeated claim is that no one saw Oswald shoot Officer Tippit and the police found spent cartridge shells at the scene of Tippit’s murder. If you just killed a cop, the conspiracy theorists say, you wouldn’t stop and unload empty cartridges, then leave them right there for anyone to find. Therefore the cartridges must have been planted by someone.

In reality, there were several witnesses who either saw Oswald with Officer Tippit, saw him shoot Officer Tippit, saw him standing over Officer Tippit’s mortally wounded body, with a gun in his hand, or saw him flee the scene holding a gun. Multiple witnesses also said that they saw Oswald unloading and reloading his weapon, or fiddle with his gun in some

way, as he left the scene. It sounds stupid (in hindsight) for a criminal to leave evidence at the scene of a crime but criminals do it all the time. If you have already shot a cop, in a residential neighborhood, in the middle of the afternoon, with multiple witnesses nearby, after shooting the President of the United States, you might not be all that concerned about leaving cartridge shells on the ground. In fact, it might be the last thing on your mind, with your only thoughts being “Get out of here” and “reload.” It should also be noted that when Oswald was caught in a nearby movie theater with the hand gun on him, he pulled it out and tried to shoot another officer. Luckily there were enough police this time to overpower him.

**4. When faking and misrepresenting the evidence fails, many conspiracy theorists turn to the question of motive.** If Oswald was a true believer in communism, they claim, who shot President Kennedy to advance his cause, or if Oswald was a



Oswald posing in his backyard with a holstered pistol, a Carcano rifle, and two Marxist newspapers, *The Militant* and *The Worker*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lee\\_Harvey\\_Oswald](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lee_Harvey_Oswald)

nut looking for attention, wouldn't he proudly admit to what he had done?

There is little in the way of evidence when trying to determine "normal" behavior for a presidential assassin, since it doesn't happen all that often, and the people who succeed at it tend to be mentally unbalanced. What an assassin would or would not say, if he was truly guilty, is highly speculative. Oswald's wife, Marina, who knew him better than anyone in the last few years of his life, felt Lee's lack of indignation after being arrested proved he was guilty. Lee was not a man to take any slight or perceived wrong without great protest. The fact that he was not yelling about the injustice of the police trying to pin these crimes on him told Marina all she needed to know about her husband's guilt. Similarly, his brother and only sibling, Robert, was convinced that Lee committed this heinous act in a desperate attempt to feel like he was important, which isn't all that different from many other shootings of public figures and innocent groups of people that have taken place before and since the assassination.

It should also be noted that Oswald lied, over and over again, while in custody. He claimed he never owned any guns, even though he was arrested with one on him. He claimed the backyard photos of him holding his weapons, taken by his wife at his request, were faked by the police or someone else. He claimed he took no package into work the morning of the assassination, despite the fact that the guy who drove Oswald to work that day said Oswald had a package which he claimed contained "curtain rods" (about the size of a disassembled rifle). No matter how obvious the lie, Oswald would still try to get away with it and then just laugh when the police caught him telling another. All of the authorities who interrogated Oswald agreed that he was the most unusual suspect they had ever seen. He almost seemed to be enjoying all the attention, rather than being worried or upset, and he may have wished to prolong being the center of attention. After all, the longer he held his cards close to his vest, the more everyone longed to see them.

It is true that teenaged Oswald had been professing Marxist beliefs even before he went into the Marines or tried to defect to the Soviet Union, but that does not mean that he necessarily saw the advancement of the communist cause as his motive. Who can say what Lee might have done had he lived longer and gone to trial. His refusal to admit his crimes upfront doesn't prove his innocence or a conspiracy. In fact, Oswald's behavior on this point

is similar to Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, who did not come right out and admit to his crime either, but certainly believed in his causes every bit as much as Oswald, if not more so.

**5. In a last ditch effort to appear reasonable, conspiracy theorists claim that Congress completely refuted the Warren Report in the late 1970s and said there was a conspiracy.** It is true that a Congressional Committee, the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA), did reopen the case in the 70s, spending a couple million dollars of taxpayer money and a great deal of manpower on the effort. This was a highly political investigation spearheaded mostly by people trying to advance their own careers in public office and desperate to find anything at all that would make themselves look like heroes. They were highly critical of the Warren Commission and did their best to present their own work as more diligent and scientific.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming weight of what they found did not change the basic facts of the case or support any of the nutty conjecture and wild claims that conspiracy theorists wish to believe. The HSCA concluded that Oswald fired three shots and one bullet missed the limo, one traveled through both the President and the Governor, and one killed President Kennedy with a fatal head wound. They also concluded that, "on the basis of the evidence available to [them]," none of the usual suspects were involved with Oswald or with the assassination in any way—not the Soviets, the Cubans, anti-Castro Cuban groups, or organized crime. The HSCA went even further and said flat out "The Secret Service, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Central Intelligence Agency were not involved in the assassination of President Kennedy," with no qualifications or reservations whatsoever. The one piece of alleged evidence that the HSCA did find in favor of an unknown co-conspirator with Oswald was later refuted by every scientific expert who examined it.

From 9-11 to Sandy Hook, the paranoid and divisive view of the world that conspiracy theories promote has been gaining in popularity since the first false "facts" about President Kennedy's death became widely accepted. Perhaps if we can educate people about what actually happened to JFK and how conspiracy theorists have deliberately lied about it, we can also get the general public to better see the lies (aka "fake news") of today. That may be overly optimistic but one thing I know for certain is that no society has ever been made great by abandoning truth. **S**