

The Mystery of the Kennedy Assassination: What the American Public Believes

By Sheldon Appleton

This year marks the 35th anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. No single event during the era of public opinion polling appears to have had so powerful an impact on Americans. When a March 1994 Gallup poll asked "What historical event that occurred during your lifetime do you remember most vividly?" a full third of a national sample cited the Kennedy assassination. Close to another third had not been born or were of pre-kindergarten age when it occurred. No other three events combined were cited as often. In fall 1988 and 1997, 90% and 85%, respectively, of national adults who were "old enough at the time" told (Associated Press/Media General/Harris) survey interviewers that they remembered where they were when they learned President Kennedy had been shot.¹

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Losing President Kennedy Was Like Losing a Family Member

News of the assassination stimulated strong emotional reactions from the start. Fortunately, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) responded rapidly. The Center crafted a questionnaire and completed 97% of 1,384 in-person interviews within a week of the event. The survey found that more than two-thirds of Americans had heard about the assassination within half an hour after the shots were fired, 92% within two hours, and all but 2% within five and a half hours. "The majority of all respondents could not recall any other time in their lives when they had the same sort of feelings... Of those who could think of such an occasion (47% of the public), the majority referred to the death of a parent, close friend, or other relative."² The following month, 54% of a national adult sample told Louis Harris interviewers that they felt like they had lost a member of their own family.

Even surveys taken decades later suggest a continuing impact on a large number of Americans. In September 1988, for example, 62% told Associated Press/Media General interviewers that they felt a personal loss from President Kennedy's assassination—a remarkable figure when we recall that a fair portion of the sample were not born or were small children when the assassination occurred. In his first public appearance after the murder of his son, entertainer Bill Cosby "quietly recalled the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and President John F. Kennedy, saying he felt the same numbing emotion when he heard his son, Ennis, had been killed."³

When asked to name our greatest president, survey respondents have repeatedly named Kennedy most often; in contrast, historians and political scientists have tended to assign him merely an "above average" ranking. Of those who expressed opinions in an October 1983 Gallup/*Newsweek* survey, almost three-fourths said they believed that "American society would have been much different" if John Kennedy had not been assassinated. Some 71% thought more money and effort would have been spent to help the poor and disadvantaged. A solid majority (58%) felt that "the great social unrest and alienation among young people in the 1960s" would not have occurred, and almost half doubted that we would have become involved in a full-scale war in Vietnam.

A Lone Assassin?

From the beginning, most Americans have not believed that Kennedy was killed by Lee Harvey Oswald alone. The 1963 NORC survey cited earlier found more than 60% believing that "others" were involved. Similarly, a Gallup poll taken just a week later found 52% saying others were involved.

A few weeks later, however, 74% in a Harris survey thought that Oswald had shot Kennedy. "When asked to state in their own words just why they think Oswald killed the President, those with opinions tended to discount the possibilities of an organized conspiracy." Over 40% said Oswald was crazy or mentally ill, about 20% maintained someone had put him up to it, and 7% saw the Communists behind it. But note that in this survey, Harris had not directly asked whether others were involved.⁴

The Harris organization conducted surveys just before and after the Warren Commission issued its report in September 1964 that found continuing support that Oswald acted alone. The public's belief that Oswald had shot Kennedy went up from 76% to 87% after the report was issued, and the belief that he "had accomplices" declined from 40% to 31%. These two surveys represent the low points in the public's acceptance of conspiracy theories about the assassination. They are the only national surveys showing a plurality—in the latter case an actual majority—of respondents accepting the idea that the assassination was the work of one man (see Table 1).

More than two years passed before the next brace of surveys. During that period, a number of popular books were published and discussed in the media challenging the methods and conclusions of the Warren Commis-

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sion. By late 1966/early 1967, both Gallup and Harris surveys showed pluralities favoring conspiratorial over “one-man” theories. Then, in February 1967, New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison captured a great deal of media attention with conspiracy charges. The Harris survey taken in May 1967 fielded a jump of 22 points over its survey of only three months earlier in the percentage believing that “others” had been involved. Four months later, after Garrison had been challenged by critics and “debunked” on an NBC special, the percentage believing in a conspiracy edged down to 60%.

Eight years passed before the next Harris survey about the assassination was conducted in October 1975. Much happened in the intervening years: the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the end of the Vietnam War, Watergate, the resignation and pardon of Richard Nixon, and two failed attempts to assassinate Gerald Ford. A Senate select committee had discovered CIA plots to assassinate Fidel Castro with the assistance of the Mafia. Additionally, it was revealed that an FBI agent had destroyed a note he had received from Oswald shortly before the assassination. Yet the public view had changed very little since the 1967 Harris survey.

In September 1976, the House of Representatives authorized a committee to investigate both the King and John Kennedy slayings. Three months later, a Gallup poll found 81%—a new high—indicating a belief that “others” had been involved in the Kennedy assassination. Though there have been some variations in the years since, no subsequent survey has found fewer than two-thirds of those with opinions believing that “others were involved,” nor more than about a fifth accepting the “lone gunman” view.

Most Believe in a Conspiracy But Disagree on Whodunit

The 1991 release of Oliver Stone’s film “JFK,” loosely based on Garrison’s allegations, generated a great deal of publicity and controversy, but seems to have converted relatively few to the “conspiracy” camp. There were not that many to be converted, since most Americans accepted the conspiracy interpretation already. Only 9% of those responding to a CBS/*New York Times* survey in January 1992 said they had seen the film and only about a third of those said it had changed their views. Moreover, the change might well have been about who was involved in a conspiracy rather than whether there had been one.

Table 1: Were “Others Involved” in the Assassination of John Kennedy?

Date	Organization	“One Man”	“Others”	Don’t Know
Nov. 1963	NORC	24%	6%	14%
Dec. 1963	Gallup	29	52	19
Sept. 1964	Harris	45	40	15
Oct. 1964	Harris	56	31	13
Dec. 1966	Gallup	36	50	15
Feb. 1967	Harris	35	44	21
May 1967	Harris	19	66	15
Sept. 1967	Harris	24	60	16
Oct. 1975	Harris	20	65	15
Dec. 1976	Gallup	11	81	9
Sept. 1978	Harris	18	75	7
March 1981	Harris	21	67	12
Oct. 1983	Gallup	11	74	15
Nov. 1983	ABC/WP	13	80	7
Oct. 1988	CBS/NYT	13	66	21
May 1991	<i>Washington Post</i>	19	57 ¹	24
May 1991	PSRA	12	73	15
Dec. 1991	Yankelovich	11	73	16
Jan. 1992	CBS/NYT	10	77	13
Oct. 1993	CBS News	11	75	14
Nov. 1993	Gallup	15	75	10

¹ A majority of these believed that Oswald fired the shots that killed Kennedy.

Note: This table shows the results of 21 surveys by nine organizations asking whether President Kennedy was killed by one man or whether others, accomplices, or conspiracies were involved. Please note that question wordings and contexts varied considerably from survey to survey. May not add to 100% due to rounding.

The apparent consensus that there was a conspiracy has not extended, however, to agreement on who the conspirators were. No majority agreement can be found in any of the relatively few surveys that have asked about this aspect. Moreover, the groups and individuals blamed have changed for reasons that appear to have more to do with the public mood at the time the survey was fielded than with new evidence presented in the media since the previous survey.

In 1963, the NORC survey asked the open-ended question: "When you first heard that the President had been shot, who did you think probably did it—that is, what sort of person?" Almost half of those polled mentioned a "crazed or fanatic individual." About a quarter suspected a "Communist, Castroite, or other leftist", and about an eighth mentioned a segregationist or other right-winger. Close to a fourth volunteered that Oswald had been paid or ordered to do the deed.

Asked directly whether specific groups were "in any way to blame," 37% assigned at least some responsibility to Cuba or Castro, 32% to Russia, 26% to "segregationists," 15% to "the people of Dallas," 15% to "John Birchers or other right-wing extremists," 6% to "American Negroes," and 22% to the Secret Service—presumably for not preventing the assassination rather than for arranging it. Otherwise, no one blamed the US government or any of its agencies.⁵ Nor did anyone responding to an October 1964 Harris survey say that the US government was responsible.

By the next time the "whodunit" question was posed—open-ended—by Gallup in December 1976, a substantial minority pointed to American politicians or the CIA as culprits. This of course was after Vietnam and Watergate and a well-documented plunge in confidence in American institutions.⁶ Still, more blamed foreigners—mostly Cuban and Russian Communists—than US governmental agencies, and an even larger number indicated they did not

know or could not specify who was involved.

Suspects Change After the Cold War

Once the Cold War ended, however, Communists were no longer the villains of choice. In a December 1991 Yankelovich survey, majorities of those believing in a conspiracy blamed internal agents within the CIA and the Mafia, each cited by about half. Sizable minorities also mentioned American mili-

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itary leaders and the Dallas police. A majority of those naming any of these groups mentioned more than one. Differently worded surveys in May 1991 by Princeton Survey Research Associates and in October 1993 by CBS News showed a similar pattern: more domestic than foreign groups were cited, the CIA and the Mafia were named most often, and US government agencies accounted for 40-48% of all mentions.

Some clues as to what lies behind these patterns can be gleaned via secondary analysis of two surveys conducted 15 years apart. The December 1976 Gallup poll and the December 1991 Yankelovich Clancy Shulman survey were taken in very different contexts and used different question wordings, yet when they posed similar questions, responses were strikingly consistent.

In December 1976, the Cold War was in full swing. The Vietnam War had recently ended. Gerald Ford, a member of the Warren Commission, had just narrowly lost reelection to Jimmy Carter. His presidential approval score was 53%. In December 1991, the nation was gearing up for a presidential election. President George Bush had presided over a victory in Desert Storm and an arms limitation agreement with the Soviet Union, but unemployment was the highest in a decade. "JFK" had been released seven months earlier. Bush's approval rating stood at 50%.

In 1976, Gallup asked: "Do you think one man was responsible for the assassination of President Kennedy or do you think others were involved? [if others] What others do you think were involved?" The 1991 Yankelovich survey asked: "Do you think Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in the Kennedy assassination or do you think there was a conspiracy that included other people? [if conspiracy] Which, if any, of these groups do you think might have been involved in a conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy?" In 1976, 11% said "one man," 81% that others were involved, and 9% expressed no opinion. Fifteen years later, 11% said that Oswald acted alone, 73% that there had been a conspiracy, and 16% that they did not know.

In both surveys, Democrats and non-whites were more likely than others to believe in a conspiracy, while those with a college education and those in the highest income groups were more likely to accept the "one-man" version.

While a December 1966 Gallup poll had showed no age differences in responses, the 1976 survey showed 18 to 29-year-olds, socialized during the Vietnam/Watergate era, much more likely to suspect a conspiracy. By 1991, it was 25 to 50-year-old respondents—largely the same generational group—who were readiest to accept a conspiracy theory. In both 1976 and 1991, this was especially true of those who accused the CIA or other governmental agencies.

Table 2: Believers in a Conspiracy Are More Likely to Have "Tuned Out" of the Political Process

Survey Items	"One Man"	Conspiracy
Express high interest in upcoming '92 elections	68%	53%
Claim to be registered to vote	89	80
Report not voting in '88	22	31
Report not voting in '84	28	36
President can "do a lot to solve" nation's problems (9-item average)	40	55

Source: Survey by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman for *Time/CNN*, December 17-22, 1991.

In both surveys, those who believed in a conspiracy were less likely to approve of the sitting president.⁷ In the 1991 survey, responses to two dozen additional items show these believers expressing less approval of the president's performance in nine specific policy areas and of the vice-president's performance, and displaying greater dissatisfaction with recent changes in the tax code, with growing income inequalities, and with what the government had done for the middle, working and lower classes. Additionally, they were more likely to think that each of the mentioned

national problems had gotten worse over the past few years.

These negative views of government apparently motivated some of the 1991 respondents to "tune out" the political process. Conspiracy theorists were less likely to express high interest in the coming election, to report being registered to vote, to have a candidate they thought they would vote for, or to report voting in 1988 or in 1984 (see Table 2).⁸ Yet, they were more likely than others to believe the president could "do a lot to solve" the country's problems.

Finally, both the 1976 and the 1991 surveys offer evidence that those who believed the assassination was the result of a conspiracy felt more hard pressed economically and more anxious and fearful generally than those who accepted the "one-man" theory. In 1991, conspiracy theorists were more inclined to feel worse off since Bush became president, to think "things in the country" were going badly, and to say they would use a small tax cut to pay off debts rather than spend or save it. They were more likely to worry a great deal about a decline in their living standards, losing

Table 3: Believers in a Conspiracy Feel More Hard Pressed and Anxious

Survey Items	"One Man"	Conspiracy
<i>1991</i>		
Say they are worse off since Bush became president	20%	35%
Think things in the country are going pretty or very badly these days	61	71
Would use \$200-\$400 tax cut to pay off debts	36	51
Worry "a great deal" about...		
Housing costs	33	46
Affordable health care	55	69
Paying for college	37	54
Supporting elderly parents	39	50
Losing their job	36	53
Being a victim of crime	38	51
Decline in their living standards	38	59
Believe haven't been told whole truth about JFK assassination	26	87
<i>1976</i>		
Expect 1977 to be "year of economic difficulty"	46	56
US should spend more to protect its people from nuclear attack	28	48
Government should require bomb shelters in all new homes	24	40
Think their community might be "a target for nuclear attack"	34	42
Believe assassination of M.L. King involved others besides J.E. Ray	43	76

Sources: Surveys by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman for *Time/CNN*, December 17-22, 1991; and the Gallup Organization, December 10-13, 1976.

their jobs, being a victim of a crime, and other problems. Not surprisingly, they were also much more reluctant to believe that Americans had been told the whole truth about the Kennedy assassination (see Table 3).

Similarly, in 1976, those who thought others were involved in the assassination were more likely to expect 1977 to be "a year of economic difficulty." Though less likely to live in a large city, they were more fearful of being the target of a nuclear attack and eager for government protection from it. Of course, they were also far more likely to believe that the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., was the result of a conspiracy too.

Bleak View of Government

The analysis, then, supports the conclusion that, over a substantial period of time, belief in a Kennedy assassination conspiracy has been related to a political world view which sees the government as failing to provide its citizens with the help they feel they need to cope with the problems of modern life. This failure is *not* seen as being due to the *inability* of the president—the symbol of our government—to do a great deal to solve them. Rather he, and the government, *could* solve them, but choose not to, preferring to put the needs of the upper

classes above those of working and middle class Americans. Participating in the political process is not helpful because, despite their promises, officeholders are not responsive to the needs of everyday citizens. A government capable of such neglect and deception cannot be trusted to tell the truth about major political events like the Kennedy (and King) assassinations. The same small group of powerful people who seem to control that government may well have decided to take action to cut down those who, like Kennedy, seem in retrospect to have been willing to act in the interests of the average American.

Recall that those who believed in a conspiracy constituted about three-quarters to four-fifths of our citizens over a spread of 15 years. Remember, too, that substantial majorities of those with opinions believe the King and Robert Kennedy assassinations were the work of conspiracies also. Harris polls show that between a fifth and two-fifths saw conspiracies as well in the attempted assassinations of George Wallace, Gerald Ford (twice), and Ronald Reagan. Until the mindset we have described has been altered, it is difficult to imagine any evidence that would convince most Americans that the assassination of John F. Kennedy was carried out by Lee Harvey Oswald alone, and that their government is not hiding the truth.

Endnotes

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all of the data and analysis were obtained through the Roper Center.

² Paul Sheatsley and Jacob Feldman, "A National Survey of Public Reactions and Behavior," in Bradley Greenberg and Edwin Parker (eds.), *The Kennedy Assassination and the American Public* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), pp. 151-154.

³ Will Lester, "Cosby shares griefs, laughs in live show," *Detroit Free Press*, February 3, 1997.

⁴ Louis Harris, "Majority believes Oswald guilty, but regrets he can't be tried," *The Washington Post*, December 31, 1963.

⁵ Sheatsley and Feldman, pp. 151-154.

⁶ See, for example, Humphrey Taylor, "Confidence in Leaders of Institutions Stays at Lowest Levels Ever (Since 1966)," *The Harris Poll* 1995, No. 17. Set at 100 in 1966, the Harris "Index of Confidence" had fallen to 41 by 1976, and would stand at 40 in 1991 and 1992, and 39 in 1995.

⁷ This is only partly the result of partisanship. In 1976, both Republican and Democratic identifiers who thought "others were involved" were less approving of President Ford. In 1991, Democrats believing in a conspiracy preferred President Bush over each of seven proposed Democratic opponents by an average margin of 20%, and had less positive images of six of these candidates than did other Democratic identifiers. (The exception, by a small margin, was Mario Cuomo.)

⁸ Those believing in the lone-gunman version and those accepting a conspiracy theory each had about the same percentage of eligible voters, respectively, in these two elections.



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