

A Cruel and Shocking Act: The Secret History of the Kennedy Assassination

Philip Shenon. (Henry Holt, 2013), 625 pp., bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Thomas G. Coffey

“Within hours of the return of the President’s body to Washington, evidence about the assassination began to disappear from the government’s files.” So begins *A Cruel and Shocking Act*, a detailed and insightful history of the most renowned entity ever to investigate the murder of President John F. Kennedy, the Warren Commission. Philip Shenon, a New York Times reporter and author of a book on the 9/11 Commission, gives a comprehensive rundown of the commissioners, their staffs, and how they dealt with the facts and conspiracy theories surrounding the Kennedy assassination. He does a better job than most of sticking to the topic (with one big exception), limiting the tangents many authors succumb to when writing about the assassination. In the process, he leads this reader to conclude the commission did an adequate, if not necessarily thorough, job in concluding Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone gunman, finding “no evidence” of a conspiracy.

The book relies on interviews with the younger staffers of the commission, many of whom, unlike their commission bosses, were still alive during the drafting of the book. These staffers are critical of the commissioners, some of whom are depicted as either lazy or stupid while the staffers are the real brains and principled souls behind the investigation. The commissioners naturally are not in print to defend their actions. Arlen Specter’s accounts come off as especially smug, with him taking cheap shots at Allen Dulles as a foolish, doddering old man. Specter describes Warren as “not much of a lawyer, and not even really smart.” The book at times reflects the view of young men frustrated with the actions of politically and socially constrained Commissioners.

a. The Warren Commission was a seven-member bipartisan board including the chief justice of the United States, Earl Warren; two members each from the Senate and House of Representatives, Richard Russell, John Sherman Cooper, Hale Boggs, and Gerald Ford; and former banker-diplomat John McCloy and former DCI Allen Dulles.

President Johnson viewed these commissioners as vital to countering conspiracy theories, which only proliferated when nightclub owner Jack Ruby shot Oswald two days after the assassination. The president urged Earl Warren to head the commission, telling the Supreme Court chief justice its work would help avert a world war, presumably by finding no foreign conspiracy. The book underscores how Johnson also saw the commission as a way to preempt Congressional hearings that would only inflame an already volatile situation.^b The commission was given a tight deadline, the better for Johnson and his administration and the nation to move on.

Even without Congressional hearings, the commission still competed against other investigations, with each separate inquiry affecting the work of the other. Shenon notes how commission members initially hoped to act as a coordinating body for other government investigations, but they decided to do some of their own detective work once its members suspected the FBI and CIA either were withholding information or could do so undetected. Commission members made a point of examining and sometimes responding in the finished report to press articles claiming to uncover the latest conspiracy, written by reporters who suspected the commission was a white-wash. It really irked members that William Manchester was getting more cooperation than Warren ever did from Jacqueline Kennedy and Robert Kennedy for his authorized book on the assassination.

As the opening sentence in *A Cruel and Shocking Act* warns us, the bureaucratic impulse towards self-preservation proved shockingly immediate and durable. The FBI and CIA tried to limit the release of information detailing

b. Considering how the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded in 1979 that there was a “probable conspiracy,” despite being unable to determine its nature and its participants, President Johnson’s decision appears farsighted.

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how both agencies had Oswald under surveillance and yet he was still able to kill the president. Only hours after Oswald was shot, the chief of the FBI Dallas office ordered one of his agents to destroy a note from Oswald delivered in person in early November telling the agents to leave his wife alone. The CIA chief of station in Mexico City, Winston Scott, revealed in his draft memoir keeping a good deal of information from the commission, including his suspicion Oswald was an agent for the Soviets or Cubans. (544) Deputy Director Richard Helms instructed his staff to give direct answers to direct questions and to not volunteer anything. DCI McCone, Helms, and Allen Dulles failed to disclose CIA plots to kill Castro—Helms later said this was the White House's responsibility. This nondisclosure avoided a line of inquiry possibly suggesting the Kennedy brothers and the CIA compelled the Cuban leader to take preemptive lethal action.^a

Finger-pointing aimed at receiving favorable treatment in the commission report was another effective means of bureaucratic self-preservation. The Dallas police were quick to blame their inability to protect the President and Oswald on the FBI, claiming an FBI agent told a Dallas police officer hours after the assassination the FBI suspected Oswald was capable of such a thing. FBI officers were not shy about expressing frustration about the Dallas police's poor protection of Oswald. Secret Service officers, whose drinking the night before made headlines, blamed the FBI for not warning them about Oswald's presence in Dallas.

The CIA comes off relatively unscathed in the commission report, an impression Shenon seeks to correct in the last part of the book. "Senior US officials, most especially at the CIA, have lied about the assassination and the events that led to it...and bear special responsibility for the conspiracy theories that are likely to plague us forever." Besides naming Helms for not telling the commission about the plots to kill Castro, Shenon cites James Angleton, CIA's counterintelligence chief, for seizing Scott's draft memoir. Angleton also refused to look into a "twist party" in Mexico City allegedly attended by Oswald, with a guest list including a Mexican woman and leftist sympathizer, Silvia Duran, who worked in the Cuban consulate. (555)

The twist partly appears to be Shenon's major contribution to our knowledge of Oswald's circumstances. And it is here where the author goes off on a tangent, from Ruby and his ties to the mafia or Cuban intelligence re-directing its surveillance towards Dallas hours before the assassination. In this case, a number of the guests insist Oswald was at the party, even going as far to claim Kennedy's assassin was having an affair with Duran. Shenon suggests an American diplomat was run out of the Foreign Service after pressing for an investigation of this matter. Other requests to look into it were turned down.

These "Oswald was seen in the company of..." sightings are a staple of many Kennedy assassination books. The assumption implicit in these examples is that Oswald was some passive recruit of Havana or Moscow. However, Oswald was not some easy mark under the control of communist handlers. He actively tried to work for the Soviets or live in Cuba and help consolidate the revolution. He was probably with these people at the party to ingratiate himself with Castro sympathizers, not the other way around. He was a wanna-be, and read lots of Marxist texts while in the marines.

And like the authors of many of these tangents, Shenon is unable or perhaps reluctant to tell the reader the implications of the new information or its cover-up. Assuming the counter-factual, with Helms and Angleton revealing to the commission and future investigations all the CIA knew about murder plots against Castro or the company Oswald kept, it is hard to tell what difference it would make to the enduring verdict Oswald was the sole gunman. Shenon himself credits commission member Gerald Ford with debunking most theories by examining the Oswald as a "plant" idea integral to most conspiracies. Oswald could not have been a plant because he got the job at the Dallas Book Depository through a family friend and just happened to be assigned to work at the Dealey Plaza location, one of two warehouses. All this happened weeks before the announcement of a Texas trip for Kennedy and months before the addition of Dallas to the itinerary. Oswald got lucky, being in the right place at the right time to kill the president. A disconcerting verdict like this is bound to dismay some researchers, as Shenon suggests, as long as new, previously hidden, information surfaces.

In short, the book is a jumble of findings despite Shenon's best efforts to delineate information found in the commission report, its supporting documents, subsequent authors' discoveries, and his own discoveries.



a. Reaction in CIA to the assassination is discussed in David Robarge, "Death of a President: DCI John McCone and the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy," in *Studies in Intelligence* 57, No. 3 (September 2013), slightly redacted and approved for release on 2014/09/29 and located in <https://www.cia.gov/library/foia>.