

Anti-Conspiracy theories: Why the media (and Shermer) believe the implausible

Written by [David Mantik](#)

In reply to Michael Shermer and the LA Times, David Mantik asks why the media refuse to accept the overwhelmingly obvious conclusion that Oswald was framed.

A reply to Michael Shermer and the *Los Angeles Times*

In the JFK assassination, why do the media refuse to accept the overwhelmingly obvious conclusion that Oswald was framed?

Michael Shermer is the publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, to which I once subscribed. [1] *Skeptic* has printed at least [two pieces](#) that [favor a JFK conspiracy](#), but now Shermer paradoxically promotes the lone gunman theory. Ironically, for that case in particular, he has dropped his pretense of skepticism.

In a [November 26, 2013 Op-Ed](#), Shermer purports to explain away a JFK conspiracy via psychology. However, if this notion is logically extrapolated, no one (not even the judicial system – nor even string theorists) would ever need to consult any facts, i.e., merely identifying an author's motives would suffice to discern the truth. But what is good for the conspiracist is good for the anti-conspiracist – perhaps some day Shermer will reveal what deep psychology motivates his own persistent obfuscation of the JFK case.

Shermer believes that conspiracy theories offer tidy and simple-minded explanations. But what could be more simple-minded than Oswald as a lone gunman?

Shermer claims that we have had a surfeit of documentaries favoring conspiracy. On the contrary, in my three decades of observing this event, we have never had such a deluge of mainstream support for Oswald. ([See my critique](#) of just one of these – on NOVA.)

He claims that evidence points toward Oswald. For once, he is correct. Unfortunately, nearly all of it is suspect. An itemized demolition of these fraudulent claims has come from a fellow Wisconsin Badger (see *Into the Nightmare*, pp. 195-205, by [Joseph McBride](#)). Is Shermer truly ignorant of all this soiled laundry? Moreover, this is hardly the first case in history of misleading evidence. The French had their own Dreyfuss Affair, where virtually all the "official evidence" pointed toward an innocent man. And the Lincoln assassination was a lone gunman case before additional evidence emerged. Even in Watergate, the evidence of conspiracy only evolved across time.

A conspiracy, by definition, requires only two persons. Given the pervasive tendency of humans to socialize, that is the natural state of human affairs. Most curiously, the [original meaning of conspiracy theory](#) was neutral. Only since the mid-1960s (suspiciously right after the JFK assassination) did it become a term of ridicule. It is now a term of derision, whose

sole purpose is promptly to strangle any serious examination of the evidence. Oddly enough, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (by Richard Hofstadter), was first published in Harper's Magazine on the first anniversary of the JFK assassination – in November 1964.[2]

[Michael Parenti](#) has observed that even the CIA is, by definition – via its covert actions and secret plans – a conspiracy. Ambassador David K. E. Bruce, in his formal report on the CIA to President Eisenhower, disclosed the devastating impact these conspiracies had on US foreign policy.[3] Even the Mafia (by its very nature) believes in conspiracies.

[Justin Fox of Time magazine](#) describes most Wall Street traders as conspiracy-minded; he adds that most good investigative reporters are also conspiracy theorists. For conspiracy theorists in this JFK case, [see my long list](#) (with supporting documentation – see Addendum 5). Here are several: *Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, John Connally, J. Edgar Hoover, John McCone, David Atlee Phillips, Robert Tanenbaum, James Rowley, George Burkley, Jesse Curry, Roy Kellerman, Evelyn Lincoln, Richard Russell, Bertrand Russell, G. Robert Blakey, and Robert Kennedy, Jr.*

Cass Sunstein, in a 2008 paper, offered his own remedies for conspiracy theories; he proposed infiltrating them to cause internal disruption. In other words, his response to conspiracy theories was to propose a conspiracy of his own. Several years ago, I [sent him a rebuttal](#). I am still waiting for his reply.

My own view of the JFK assassination has evolved from mere belief into actual knowledge. Based on my seeing (on [nine different occasions](#)) the JFK artifacts at the National Archives, I now know that the JFK skull X-rays are copies, not originals, and that the mysterious 6.5 mm bullet-like fragment (supposedly at the back of the skull) was added to the X-ray in the darkroom, merely to incriminate the supposed weapon – a 6.5 mm Mannlicher-Carcano.

On November 22, 2013, I met with James Jenkins, who had been Dr. Boswell's technician at the JFK autopsy. He confirmed my conclusion (based on hundreds of data points via optical densitometry on the extant JFK skull X-rays) – that the images of the brain in the National Archives are fraudulent. But this was no surprise; after all, the official autopsy photographer, John Stringer, had long ago disavowed these photographs as those he took.

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David W. Mantik earned his Ph.D. in physics at Wisconsin and his M.D. at Michigan. He is Board Certified in radiation oncology by the American Board of Radiology. A former fellow of the American Cancer Society and director of residency training in radiation oncology at Loma Linda University, he has also used proton beams to cure cancer.

"A reliable way to make people believe in falsehoods is frequent repetition, because familiarity is not easily distinguished from truth."

"It is the consistency of the information that matters for a good story, not its completeness. Indeed, you will often find that knowing little makes it easier to fit everything you know into a coherent pattern."

"The confidence that individuals have in their beliefs depends mostly on the quality of the story they can tell about what they see, even if they see very little. We often fail to allow for the possibility that evidence that should be critical to our judgment is missing – what [you] see is all there is (WYSIATI)."

"They didn't want more information that might spoil their story."

Postscript: A Rebuttal from Shermer (and the *Los Angeles Times*)

Before my critique had even been submitted to the *Los Angeles Times*, Shermer had already struck back. Here is what the Times printed on Saturday, November 30, 2013 (p. A15).

Facts or Conspiracies?

Almost all of the readers who responded to Michael Shermer's November 26, 2013 Op-Ed didn't buy his idea that psychology helps to explain why JFK assassination theories persist. Reader Stephany Yablow of North Hollywood wrote:

"J. Edgar Hoover came up with the lone-gunman scenario within 24 hours of the assassination as a cover-up. Lyndon Johnson backed it, demanding that the case be closed quickly.

"The Warren Commission was political window dressing. It failed to thoroughly investigate, interview witnesses and experts and conduct forensic studies. It produced a shallow report.

"Maybe people would believe the lone-gunman theory if Jack Ruby didn't waltz into the jail and kill Lee Harvey Oswald; hence, the theory that someone directed Ruby to do so. There must have been at least two people (the requisite number of actors to define a 'conspiracy'). If the lone-gunman proponents had a better answer, they haven't convinced us yet."

Michael Shermer responds:

[Note by Mantik: Misleading statements so densely infest this manifesto that each opinion is itemized, followed by my comments. Shermer's words are in italics.]

1. *The Warren Commission report was shallow? At 880 pages, I wonder what would be considered deep.*

Reply (based on the [work of Walt Brown](#)): Of the 488 witnesses who testified, only 93 did so in the presence of any of the seven members of the Commission. Here is the scorecard: Earl Warren – 93, Allen Dulles – 70, Gerald Ford – 60, John Sherman Cooper – 50, John McCloy – 35, Hale Boggs – 20, and Richard Russell – 6. *What value would be placed on a judicial proceeding in an American courtroom in which the prosecutors, the defense attorneys, or certain jurors just came and went as they pleased?* Furthermore, anyone who has even glanced at these volumes quickly recognizes that trivia and irrelevancies populate the pages, but critical witnesses are often studiously avoided. Insofar as a "deep" analysis, one example is Douglas Horne's five volume set: *Inside the Assassination Records Review Board*. Horne's book is 1880 pages. (The Warren Report is actually 888 pages.) Another would be Walt Brown's *Chronology of the JFK Assassination*.

2. *In any case, five different government investigations – along with countless private inquiries – have concluded that the evidence overwhelmingly points toward Oswald as the lone assassin.<*

Reply: Shermer apparently has not read that brilliant piece by Dr. Gary Aguilar and Kathy Cunningham: "[How Five Investigations into JFK's Medical Autopsy Evidence Got It Wrong](#)." Insofar as private investigations, Shermer likewise seems hopelessly lost – the vast majority favor conspiracy. (See his last statement here, which implies that he does know this.)

3. *Oswald's Carcano rifle with his fingerprints on it was found on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository.*

Reply: The weapon (actually a carbine, not a rifle) in evidence is not the one ordered by LHO. The Commission states that he used a coupon from the February 1963 issue of *The American Rifleman* (but this ad does not appear in the Commission). The ad is for a 36" Carcano weighing 5.5#. The weapon in evidence is supposedly 42" and weighs 8# (with sling and sight). The first weapon reported in the Texas School Book Depository was a 7.65 German Mauser; Eugene Boone filed two separate reports to this effect, and Seymour Weitzman filed a confirming affidavit. Boone later testified that Captain Fritz and Lt. Day also identified it as a Mauser. The weapon in evidence, however, clearly reads "Made Italy" and "Cal, 6.5"." Furthermore, no one has explained why a wannabe assassin would purchase a weapon by money order through the mail – instead of paying cash locally (with no trace of ownership). In addition, on the supposed purchase date (March 12), Oswald was at work from 8 AM to 12:15 PM (see *Harvey and Lee* by John Armstrong for company employee records). If the post office records can be believed, LHO walked 11 blocks to the General Post Office, purchased a money order, but then did not mail it from there. Instead, he walked many blocks out of his way (eventually using a mailbox) before returning to work, where his absence was not noted. This order then arrived the *very next day* at Klein's (in Chicago) – and was already deposited at the bank *that same day!* Unfortunately, the bank deposit actually reads February 15, 1963 – not March 13, 1963. Of course, if the date really had been February, then the serial number C2766 could not apply to the weapon in the backyard photographs. For even more anomalies on the MC see *Reclaiming Parkland* by James DiEugenio.

Insofar as fingerprints go, none were initially found on the weapon. Only after a visit by federal agents to the morgue, where Oswald was fingerprinted – according to the mortician, did a palm print appear on the weapon. Moreover, during the last several decades much doubt has been cast on fingerprint evidence in general; [see my review of John McAdams's book](#).

4. *Three bullet casings there match what 80% of eyewitnesses in Dealey Plaza reported hearing: three shots.*

Reply: The initial report described only two casings. The so-called Magic Bullet (which should have matched the casings) could not be identified at Parkland Hospital by the man who handled the actual bullet. Josiah Thompson (a private detective) and Dr. Gary Aguilar have [demolished the chain of possession](#) for this bastard bullet. Regarding witnesses, a long list of them reported that the final two shots were very close together, much too close for the Mannlicher-Carcano. [4]

5. *It was the same rifle Oswald purchased in March 1963, which he then used the following month in an attempt to assassinate the rabidly anti-communist Army Maj. Gen. Edwin Walker.*

Reply: Walker denied that Oswald had shot at him. The bullet was not matched to any weapon owned by Oswald. At the time of the event, the *Dallas Morning News* reported a 30.06 bullet. (Of course, the *Warren Report* omitted this.) A witness, Kirk Coleman, saw two men, but neither was Oswald. A photograph of a car behind Walker's house turned up at Ruth Paine's house and was ascribed to Oswald. While the police had that photograph, the license plate disappeared from the back of the car. However, Chief Curry's book (1969) contains a photograph of Oswald's possessions, including that Walker photograph. In that version, the license plate is intact – which strongly implies that the police had cut it out of the other one.

6. *Co-workers saw Oswald on the sixth floor of the depository shortly before JFK's motorcade arrived, and saw him exit soon after the assassination.*

Reply: Oswald worked in the building and might well have been seen there. But Shermer fails to tell us *when* he was seen there. The only witness the Commission could round up was Howard Brennan, who had poor eyesight; he could not identify Oswald in a line-up later that same day. Furthermore, the window in the sniper's nest was partly closed, making it virtually impossible for Brennan to get a good look at the man's face. Arnold Rowland and Carolyn Walther saw a man with a rifle, but neither identified Oswald. Furthermore, both said they saw *two men!* Within 90 seconds of the shooting, Roy Truly spotted Oswald drinking a coke in the second floor lunch room. Victoria Adams walked down the same stairs (from the fifth floor) right after the shooting and did not see Oswald.

7. *Oswald went home and picked up his pistol and left again, shortly after which he was stopped by Dallas Police Officer J. D. Tippit, whom Oswald shot dead with four bullets.*

Reply: "The official story of the Tippit killing is full of holes." [5] McBride has devoted most of his book (and much of his life) to the Tippit case. If Shermer truly likes long books (as he claimed about the Warren Report), then he will love this book (662 pages). It is mostly devoted to the Tippit case. The author firmly denies that Oswald shot Tippit. Another author, John Armstrong, has investigated this murder for two decades and has now developed [a detailed scenario of the event](#). Has Shermer done as much research on this as Armstrong or McBride?

8. *He then ducked into a nearby theater without paying, which resulted in a police confrontation.*

Reply: Theater employee Warren Burroughs said that Oswald went to the balcony. A police dispatcher (at 1:46 PM) stated that Oswald was in the balcony. However, Oswald was arrested on the main floor. Bernard Haire saw a second man (who was flushed, as though he had been in a struggle) leave the rear of the theater and then be placed into a police car. Until Haire saw Oliver Stone's film, he had always thought that he had seen Oswald's arrest. Can Shermer explain any of this?

9. *Two days later, Oswald was himself assassinated by a pro-Kennedy nightclub owner named Jack Ruby, who said his motive was "saving Mrs. Kennedy the discomfiture of coming back to trial." Thousands more pieces of evidence all converge to the unmistakable conclusion that Oswald acted alone.*

Reply: Does Shermer truly know more than these legal minds, which were deeply immersed in the case? (None of them believed in a lone gunman.)

- Senator Richard Russell, member of the Warren Commission
- John McCloy, member of the Warren Commission
- Rep. Hale Boggs, member of the Warren Commission
- Senator John Sherman Cooper, member of the Warren Commission
- Rep. Henry Gonzalez, chair of the HSCA
- Rep. Don Edwards, chair of the HSCA
- Robert Blakey, Chief Counsel for the HSCA
- Robert Tanenbaum, Chief Counsel for the HSCA
- Richard A. Sprague, Chief Counsel for the HSCA
- Gary Cornwell, Deputy Chief Counsel for the HSCA

10. *In the 50 years since, conspiracy fabulists have concocted more than 300 different people and organizations allegedly involved in the assassination, and yet not one line of evidence conclusively supports any of these suspects. It's time to move on and let JFK R.I.P.*

Reply: If Shermer had paid any attention to JFK books or meetings during the past year, he would know that the evidence of a cover-up by federal agencies is now overwhelming. Instead, he has responded like an automaton, programmed to recite the Commission's dogmas. He even evades the last official government investigation (the HSCA), which declared a probable JFK conspiracy. We might well ask: What about history? For example, what if the Dreyfuss affair had simply been left to lie dormant? Or what if the Lincoln assassination had never been pursued – or if no investigation had been done into Watergate, or into Iran-Contra, or into BCCI? What then Mr. Shermer?

Notes

1. I let my subscription lapse after I became skeptical of some of these alleged skeptics.
2. According to Wikipedia, on November 21, 1963 (sic) Hofstadter delivered the Herbert Spencer Lecture at Oxford University (on this same subject)
3. Timothy Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes* (2007), pp. 133-135. The complete report is still unavailable!
4. *Assassination Science* (1998), edited by James Fetzer, p. 296.
5. Joseph McBride, *Into the Nightmare* (2013), p. 201.