



PHOTOS FROM THE WARREN COMMISSION REPORT

# OSWALD'S TALE

BY DAN ARMSTRONG

"If we obtain nothing else, we can count on gaining a greater understanding of the dominant state of our political existence in these decades of Cold War, for Oswald, willy-nilly, became one of the leading actors in this tragicomedy of super-powers who, with limited comprehension, lived in dread of each other."

—NORMAN MAILER  
("Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery")

"I will smash the CIA into a thousand pieces."

—JOHN F. KENNEDY

Why in the damned world would anyone want to jump back into the morass of lies and suspicions surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy? Does it really matter any more who pulled the trigger or triggers in this most awful of American tragedies? Thirty-two years and a million hours of research have intervened since that black day in Dallas and still no presiding scenario has been resolved. Shouldn't we just let this ugly little sore in American history heal up and scar? Shouldn't we move on to more pressing needs? Healthcare, ecology, education? Why must we keep picking at this scab, causing it to bleed and bleed again? Why should Norman Mailer, arguably the most significant American journalist of the last fifty years, invest his reputation and that of Random House Incorporated to worry again upon this old bone?

"One stimulus to the writing of this book was an offer from the Belarus KGB to allow a look into their files on Oswald," writes Mailer as he begins volume two of his 791 page nonfiction novel, *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*. To Assassination nuts and conspiracy fiends alike this is reason enough to exhume this old bone. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the gradual opening up of clandestine Russia, veil by veil, there should be considerable interest, to some, about what the KGB might have thought about this peculiar U. S. Marine's tentative defection to the Soviet Union. Add to this Mailer's own invariably comprehensive reportage and unique capacity for psychological investigation, and much like his exploration of convicted killer Gary Gilmore in the Pulitzer Prize winning *Executioner's Song*, we have a fascinating and involving piece of writing for just about anyone who likes a good who-done-it.

"We are," wrote Mailer, "in effect, studying an object (to use the KGB's word for a person under scrutiny) as he tumbles through the prisms of a kaleidoscope. It is as if by such means we hope to penetrate the psychology of Lee Harvey Oswald." It is Mailer's intent to paint a psychological portrait of Oswald. A portrait so real and dynamic he hopes that it, in conjunction with the details of the incident itself, will help us decide whether Oswald was in fact a lone assassin as determined by the much maligned Warren Commission in 1964. Or if he was part of a "probable" conspiracy, as reported by the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1979. This is an ambitious task. Even for Mr. Mailer. Objectivity needs to be absolutely hairline in the subtle slanting of every unanswered nuance in the creation of his highly complex protagonist Lee Harvey Oswald.

"This book...was undertaken without a fixed conclusion in either direction," he confesses. "Indeed, it began with a prejudice in favor of the conspiracy theorists. All the same, one's plan for the work was to take Oswald on his own terms as long as that was possible — that is, try to comprehend his deeds as arising from nothing more than himself until such a premise lost all headway." Intriguing concept.

And through the course of the book, Mailer makes every effort to provide objectivity, so much so that this white whale of Oswald feels to be as much an enigma for the author as he proceeds as he is to the reader in his progress. Over and over again he attacks the facts fearlessly and painstakingly, particularly in his review of the KGB reports that repeatedly question Oswald's motives, his intelligence, his felicity with the Russian language and his emotional stability. They, it seems, were as uncertain of Oswald's defection as were the Americans. Incredibly, intelligence agencies on both sides of the Iron Curtain viewed this 20 year old in the role of double agent.

Roughly half the book concerns itself with Oswald's life in Russia, and it is mostly new material for the thirsty assassination buff. Upon this solid foundation the second half of the book reconstructs the assassination drama upon a backdrop of investigative survey. Drawing upon the Warren Report, the work of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, Gerald Posner's *Case Closed*, Priscilla McMillan's *Marina and Lee*, Jim Marrs' *Crossfire*, Carl Oglesby's *The Yankee and Cowboy War*, and other sources, Mailer presents the entire case, every loose end, every conspiratorial supposition, every strained conjecture, with clarity and objectivity to the extent that there may be no better book to introduce a new student to the subject. In total, the picture he paints is an excellent one, but not a new one. Thirty-plus years of investigation by scores of researchers has brought no conclusive answer, only question after question and serious suspicions about the dark machinations behind the deed. And Mailer can do no better. Still he takes a swing at it.

After giving us everything, accurately and dramatically, and basically proving (to this reader anyway) that nothing conclusive can be determined about Oswald's part in the shooting, Mr. Mailer inexplicably concludes with a gaping implausibility. Despite the fact that he has shown Oswald had questionable FBI liaisons, had indirect contact with mob kingpin Carlos Marcello, and that the CIA knew of Oswald's assassination attempt on John Birch Society leader General Edwin Walker six months prior to the assassination and did not arrest him; despite the fact that the House Select Committee on Assassinations' extensive investigation concluded "that the most likely family bosses of organized crime to have participated in such a unilateral assassination plan were Carlos Marcello and Santos Trafficante"; despite the fact that there is no piece of evidence nor argument more explosive or revealing than the once secreted-away by Time/Life home-movie taken by Abraham Zapruder that all but

unequivocally proves, regardless of what Oswald might have been doing, that at least one shot (and surely the fatal shot) came from some location other than the School Book Depository; despite all this, Mr. Mailer concludes, "that Lee had the character to kill Kennedy, and that he probably did it alone." Moreover, "the odds in favor of one's personal conclusion (meaning Mailer's) can be no better than, let's say, 3 out of 4 that he is definitely guilty and the sole actor in the assassination." Three out of four? How about one in a thousand? This indeed is strange. No, worse than that! In reading this statement, one wonders if Mailer bothered to read his own book. If Mailer's psychological portrait proved anything, it was that Oswald did have the makings of a megalomaniac, but that he also looked like a perfect patsy, the perfect pawn! God, it almost seems that Mailer, like Ruby, is screaming at us to have him take a lie-detector test! (Personally, I don't get it. And why does it bother me so that Mailer's last book was about the CIA?)

So what exactly does this mean? To Hell with the details and the facts of the assassination? Damn the worries about who shot who, magic bullets, and Jack Ruby's meeting with Santos Trafficante in a Cuban prison cell in 1959? Forget about Mailer's book? Forget about this being a book review?

Let's just step back and take a long look at this thing, this assassination phenomenon, the act and the reaction and our obsession with it all. What does it tell about ourselves? What does it tell about our government and the state of affairs presently at work in our country today?

Within the story of the Kennedy assassination lies an x-ray vision of the innermost workings of our government. Through the course of the phenomenon — assassination, cover-up, debate, congressional hearings, private investigation, Oliver Stone's movie *JFK* (Stone's recent movie *Nixon* also has some critical and very criticized observations on JFK's assassination) — we are indirectly given a clear window into the bizarre world of the intelligence community that lies behind the cardboard facade of the White House and the Capitol Building. We are introduced to the various gradations of informants, operatives, agents and illicit sources that are part of the intelligence community's information gathering network and operations. We see the jealousies, barriers, overlapping and power struggles between agencies, the FBI, CIA, Dallas Police Department, the Warren Commission, even underworld criminal organizations and the KGB. We are shown the infrastructure of the intelligence community. And it is a sobering sight, a monster created out of the Cold War, a war of lies, double-agents and disinformation. Also revealed is the true nature of these last fifty years that could be accurately labeled The Age of Deceit — an age that still marshals on. And no event, no war, no catastrophe more exposes the icy heart of this age than the gangland slaying of our 35th President.

In 1964 the party line was that a lone nut in Dealey Plaza was responsible. This lie has steadily torn the heart out of our democracy. Thirty-two years after the fact the central casualty of the Warren Commission's charade has been the public's trust. There is no trust in our government at all anymore. Stop the man or woman on the street. Ask them if they trust the system that broods inside the freeway belting our nation's capitol. So awful is the state of things that laughter is apt to be the most common response. Followed by a sardonic 'NO!' And then maybe a flood of vulgarities. And for good reason. Only 40% of the people voted in the last national election. The majority decided not to participate. And we call this a democracy? We have a problem here!

Ten months after the assassination, in September 1964, the findings of the Warren Commission were made public in a 26-volume report. Simply, the commission had determined that Lee Harvey Oswald was the assassin and that he was working alone. Despite the impeccable reputation of Chief Justice Earl Warren, chairman of the commission, the report was met with considerable criticism almost immediately. Still it passed silently into the realm of recent history and was mostly forgotten by all except a handful of individual researchers. Approximately three years later, New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, at the suggestion of Louisiana Senator Russell Long (brother of the late Huey, who was also assassinated), read the Warren Report in its entirety. The glaring inadequacy of the commission's work led Garrison to his well-known and mostly ridiculed investigation of the assassination. Though his research uncovered many loose ends and considerable suggestion of a deep vein of treachery in our own government, Garrison's scream fell primarily on deaf ears and like the Warren Report dropped quietly into the past.

The question of conspiracy however would not go away. Gallup polls taken in the early '70s showed that nearly 80% of the country believed that Kennedy's assassination was the result of a conspiracy. 70% felt the same about the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1975, House Representative Henry Gonzalez of Texas called for a Congressional review of the assassinations of John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and the shooting of George Wallace. There was great reluctance in the old guard to reopen these cases, but in September 1976, after a year of feet-dragging and postponement, the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) came into being. Two years later, during which time several key witnesses to the Kennedy assassination met "accidental" deaths or committed suicide and Gonzalez in frustration had quit the leadership of his own committee, the HSCA quietly concluded there had, in fact, been at least one other gunman involved in the shooting and that this suggested a conspiracy of unknown order. Even though this meant that at least one assassin had gotten away scot free, the report was in no way acted on. No arrests were ever made. No further action was taken. Hardly anyone even seemed to

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