
Lee Harvey Oswald & the Liberal Crack-Up

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LIBERALISM ENTERED the 1960's as *the* vital force in American politics, riding a wave of accomplishment running from the Progressive era through the New Deal and beyond. A handsome young president, John F. Kennedy, had just been elected on the promise to extend the unfinished agenda of reform. Liberalism owned the future, as Orwell might have said. Yet by the end of the decade, liberal doctrine was in disarray, with some of its central assumptions broken by the experience of the immediately preceding years. It has yet to recover.

What happened? There is, of course, a litany of standard answers, from the political to the cultural to the psychological, each seeking to explain the great upheaval summed up in that all-purpose phrase, "the 60's." To some, the relevant factor was a long overdue reaction to the repressions and pieties of 1950's conformism. To others, the watershed event was the escalating war in Vietnam, sparking an opposition movement that itself escalated into widespread disaffection from received political ideas and indeed from larger American purposes. Still others have pointed to the simmering racial tensions that would burst into the open in riots and looting, calling into question underlying assumptions about the course of integration if not the very possibility of social harmony.

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No doubt, the combination of these and other events had much to do with driving the nation's political culture to the Left in the latter half of the decade. But there can be no doubt, either, that an event from the early 1960's—namely, the assassination of Kennedy himself—contributed heavily. As many observers have noted, Kennedy's death seemed somehow to give new energy to the more extreme impulses of the Left, as not only left-wing ideas but revolutionary leftist leaders—Marx, Lenin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, and Castro among them—came in the aftermath to enjoy a greater vogue in the United States than at any other time in our history. By 1968, student radicals were taking over campuses and joining protest demonstrations in support of a host of extreme causes.

It is one of the ironies of the era that many young people who in 1963 reacted with profound grief to Kennedy's death would, just a few years later, come to champion a version of the left-wing doctrines that had motivated his assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald. But why should this have been so? What was it about mid-century liberalism that allowed it to be knocked so badly off balance by a single blow?

TO RECALL John F. Kennedy's brief tenure as President is to be reminded of the distance that American liberalism has traveled since those days. His landmark domestic initiatives, passed with modest adjustments after his death, were a

civil-rights bill and a major tax reduction to stimulate the economy. The civil-rights legislation is well known, but many have forgotten Kennedy's across-the-board, 30-percent tax cut, with the highest rate falling from 91 percent to 65 percent—a measure that, two decades later, would inspire Ronald Reagan's own tax-cutting agenda.

Kennedy was, moreover, a sophisticated anti-Communist who understood the stakes at issue in the cold war. His inspiring inaugural address in 1961 was entirely about foreign policy and the challenge of Communism to freedom-loving peoples. As President, his most notable victory was achieved by confronting the Soviet Union over its missiles in Cuba and by forcing their removal. And he was nothing if not forthright in declaring America's universal aims. "Let every nation know," he famously announced in his inaugural address, "whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty." America, he said in a speech to the Massachusetts legislature a week before he took office, was "a city upon a hill," an example and a model for the entire world.

Though now remembered for his liberal idealism, Kennedy was, in short, a representative instead of the era's *pragmatic* liberalism: an advocate of practical reform at home and American strength abroad. With his bold rhetoric and confidence in problem-solving, he was in many ways the personification of an earlier era's liberal hopes. Both in substance and in approach, he seemed to express the central principle of the reform tradition—namely, that progress was to be achieved not by the quixotic pursuit of ideals but by the application of rationality and knowledge to the problems of public life. Kennedy himself often spoke in these terms, pointing to ignorance and extremism as the twin enemies to be overcome.

None of this was an accident of the moment; it had been building for a long time. During the 1950's, thoughtful liberals had come to understand that they were no longer outsiders in American life; to the contrary, they had become the political establishment. Already in power for two extraordinarily eventful decades, they could take credit for the domestic experiments of the New Deal, the victory over fascism, and the creation of the post-war international order. By virtue of these achievements, liberalism had emerged as the nation's public philosophy.

Though a doctrine of reform and progress, liberalism had thus begun to absorb some of the in-

tellectual characteristics of conservatism: a due regard for tradition and continuity, a sense that progress must be built on the solid achievements of the past. More strikingly, liberals had come to see their most vocal domestic opponents as radicals—individuals and movements bent on undoing the established order. This challenge to the liberal establishment came not from the radical Left, however, but from the Right, in the form of anti-Communism, Christian fundamentalism, and racial and religious bigotry.

Adlai Stevenson, a favorite of liberals of the era, described during his 1952 presidential campaign the paradoxical situation that liberals now occupied:

The strange alchemy of time has somehow converted the Democrats into the truly conservative party in the country—the party dedicated to conserving all that is best and building solidly and safely on these foundations. The Republicans, by contrast, are behaving like the radical party—the party of the reckless and embittered, bent on dismantling institutions which have been built solidly into our social fabric.

THE LIBERAL movement was fortunate to have had during this time a group of formidable intellectual spokesmen, figures like Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Bell, Lionel Trilling, and David Riesman. Their persistent focus was on the dangers to the nation, as they saw them, arising from the American Right. In contrast to their Progressive and New Deal predecessors, who had thought mainly in terms of change, reform, and new policy, these writers thought more in terms of consolidating earlier gains, defending them against fresh challenges, and reconciling them with the broad tradition of American democracy.

In their view, the complaints of the Right derived not from groups in possession of competing status and authority but from those who felt weak and dispossessed by modern life. Bell referred to this collection of forces as the "radical Right," a term he employed in the title of an influential book of essays that he edited on the subject in 1962. Hofstadter preferred the term "pseudo-conservative," which he borrowed from Theodor Adorno, the German sociologist, to describe those "who employ the rhetoric of conservatism, [but] show signs of a serious and restless dissatisfaction with American life, traditions, and institutions. They have little in common with the temperate and compromising spirit of true conservatism in the classical sense of the word."

These scholars saw the McCarthyites and religious fundamentalists of the 1950's as only the most up-to-date expression of an enduring extremist impulse that had earlier produced the "Know-Nothings" in the 1850's, the populists in the 1890's, and the followers of Father Charles Coughlin or Huey Long in the 1930's. Such movements, while arising out of different conditions, had certain features in common—in particular, the conviction that their people had been "sold out" by a conspiracy of Wall Street financiers, traitors in the government, or some other sinister group. As Bell put it in an essay in *The Radical Right*, "The theme of conspiracy haunts the mind of the radical rightist."

This same thought was developed most memorably in Hofstadter's 1964 book, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Hofstadter was impressed not simply by the wilder statements emanating from the radical Right—for example, the claim by Joseph Welch of the John Birch Society that President Eisenhower was a Communist—but by a mode of argumentation that seemed to begin with feelings of persecution and conclude with a recital of grandiose plots against the nation and its way of life. Communist infiltration was, of course, a favored theme, but Hofstadter also cited paranoid fears about fluoride in the drinking water, efforts to control the sale of guns, federal aid to education, and other (usually) liberal initiatives of government. Important events, from this perspective, never happened through coincidence, circumstance, or the unfolding of complex processes; they were invariably the work of some unseen but all-powerful malevolent force.

IN THE months leading up to Kennedy's assassination, violent acts committed by representatives of the radical Right did indeed seem to be escalating. In June 1963, the civil-rights leader Medgar Evers was shot and killed outside his home in Jackson, Mississippi. In September, a bomb was detonated at a black church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four young girls. The Ku Klux Klan was linked to both crimes. In October, Adlai Stevenson, then the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, ventured to Dallas for a speech to commemorate "UN Day" and was met by demonstrators proclaiming "United States Day." Heckled during his remarks, Stevenson was jostled and spat upon by protesters as he tried to depart and finally was struck over the head with a cardboard placard as he made his way to his car.

Seeming to fit into a pattern of right-wing vio-

lence, these events were easily absorbed into the explanatory structure of liberal thought. The melee in Dallas, meanwhile, gave Kennedy aides pause about the President's planned trip to that city. Dallas, they feared, was a hotbed of the far Right and a dangerous place to visit.

Hence, when the word spread on November 22 that President Kennedy had been shot, the immediate and understandable reaction was that the assassin must be a right-wing extremist—an anti-Communist, perhaps, or a white supremacist. Such speculation went out immediately over the national airwaves, and it seemed to make perfect sense, echoed by the likes of John Kenneth Galbraith and Chief Justice Earl Warren, who said that Kennedy had been martyred "as a result of the hatred and bitterness that has been injected into the life of our nation by bigots."

It therefore came as a shock when the police announced later the same day that a Communist had been arrested for the murder, and when the television networks began to run tapes taken a few months earlier showing the suspected assassin passing out leaflets in New Orleans in support of Fidel Castro. Nor was Lee Harvey Oswald just any leftist, playing games with radical ideas in order to shock friends and relatives. Instead, he was a dyed-in-the-wool Communist who had defected to the Soviet Union and married a Russian woman before returning to the U.S. the previous year. One of the first of an evolving breed, Oswald had lately rejected the Soviet Union in favor of third-world dictators like Mao, Ho, and Castro.

Informed later that evening of Oswald's arrest, Mrs. Kennedy lamented bitterly that her husband had apparently been shot by this warped and misguided Communist. To have been killed by such a person, she felt, would rob his death of all meaning. Far better, she said, if, like Lincoln, he had been martyred for civil rights and racial justice.

Given her husband's politics, Mrs. Kennedy's comment might seem curious. For one thing, he had staked his presidency on mounting an aggressive challenge to Communism; for another, during his brief term in office the cold war had reached its most dangerous point in his confrontation with the Soviet Union over Cuba. From this perspective, it should not have been so jarring to learn that he was a casualty of the cold war. More significantly, however, the remark suggests that Mrs. Kennedy was already thinking about how President Kennedy's legacy should be framed, and was sensing that the identity of the assassin might prove inconvenient in this regard.

OSWALD WAS arrested, and later charged with the assassination, on the basis of solid evidence—all of it laid out in the Warren Commission report made public ten months later and, since then, in numerous television documentaries and in books like Gerald Posner's *Case Closed* (1993).

Yet the Warren report was vigorously attacked soon after it appeared, and has been the subject of controversy ever since. There is little point in rehearsing the many criticisms of the commission's work, nearly all of which question the conclusion that a single gunman was responsible for the assassination. These criticisms have been exhaustively answered in Posner's book and in two comprehensive articles in COMMENTARY by Jacob Cohen.* Even Norman Mailer, in his own exhaustive study (*Oswald's Tale*, 1995), concluded that Oswald was the probable assassin. Moreover, as Posner and Cohen point out, whatever difficulties attend the Warren report, they pale in comparison to those confronting the various conspiracy theories that have been offered as alternatives to the much-maligned "single bullet" theory of the Warren Commission.

What, then, explains the resilience of such fanciful and conspiratorial thinking? Part of the answer surely lies in the enduring need of the Left to circumvent the most inconvenient fact about President Kennedy's assassination—that he was killed by a Communist and probably for reasons related to left-wing ideology. If the case against Oswald can be clouded or denied, it opens up the possibility that Kennedy was killed by a more familiar villain, one of the many malignant forces on the Right.

Thus, in *JFK* (1991), the filmmaker Oliver Stone, like his hero the New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, suggests that the assassination was engineered by governmental figures connected to the FBI or CIA. Some have insinuated that Lyndon Johnson was involved in the plot. Others have argued that Kennedy was the victim of a "hit" by organized crime in retaliation for his administration's zealous prosecution of mob figures. All of these theorists have much in common with the archetypes of Hofstadter's "paranoid style": they begin their investigations with presumptions of conspiracy, and then arrange their facts to justify a pre-determined conclusion.

True, they are also responding to a key weakness in the Warren report, which, though taking full note of Oswald's Communist sympathies and activities, played them down as motivations for killing President Kennedy. Oswald, the commission said,

was driven by several factors, including a psychological "hostility to his environment," failure to establish meaningful relationships with others, difficulties with his wife, perpetual discontent with the world around him, hatred of American society, a search for recognition and a wish to play a role in history, and, finally, his commitment to Marxism and Communism. This farrago of causes implies that Oswald was more a confused loner than a motivated ideologue. In the years and decades following the assassination, the American people would increasingly view the assassin in such terms.

Yet the record suggests that the decisive and overriding factor behind Oswald's various actions was ideology. The assassination of President Kennedy was hardly an isolated incident in his political odyssey from the Marine Corps to the Soviet Union and back to the United States. In the months leading up to the assassination, Oswald had tried to kill the ultra-conservative retired Army General Edwin A. Walker (his shot missed) with the same rifle that he later used to shoot President Kennedy; initiated an altercation with anti-Castro figures in New Orleans that led to his arrest; and visited the Cuban embassy in Mexico City where, while seeking permission to travel to Cuba, he issued a threat against the life of the President. Edward Jay Epstein (in *Legend*, 1978) and Jean Davison (in *Oswald's Game*, 1983) suggest that Oswald shot President Kennedy in retaliation for the administration's schemes to eliminate Castro.

There is much about Oswald and the assassination that can now never be known for certain. Of one thing, however, there can be little doubt: there would never have been any serious talk about a conspiracy if President Kennedy had been shot by a right-wing figure whose guilt was established by the same evidence as condemned Oswald. Such an event would have been readily understood in terms of then prevailing assumptions about the dangers from the Right. Kennedy's assassin, however, bolted onto the historical stage in violation of a script that many people had assimilated as the truth about America. Instead of adjusting their thinking accordingly, they strove to account for the discordance by taking refuge in conspiracy theories.

THERE WAS also another avenue of escape from the contradiction posed by the assassination. If one had to accept the fact that Oswald committed the deadly act, it was still possible to identify some broader cause that did not necessarily involve

* "Conspiracy Fever," October 1975; "Yes, Oswald Alone Killed Kennedy," June 1992.

a conspiracy. Once again, Mrs. Kennedy instinctively hinted at such a cause in the grief-filled hours following the assassination. Jim Bishop (in *The Day Kennedy Was Shot*, 1972) reports that aboard Air Force One en route back to Washington, various people, including Lady Bird Johnson, had urged her to change out of the blood-spattered clothes she was still wearing. "No," she replied more than once, "I want them to see what they have done."

Who were "they"? The *New York Times* columnist James Reston supplied an answer of sorts in an article that appeared the next day under the title, "Why America Weeps: Kennedy Victim of Violent Streak He Sought to Curb in Nation." Reston wrote:

America wept tonight, not alone for its dead young President, but for itself. The grief was general, for somehow the worst in the nation had prevailed over the best. The indictment extended beyond the assassin, for something in the nation itself, some strain of madness and violence, had destroyed the highest symbol of law and order.

The nation itself, Reston implied, was ultimately responsible for Oswald's murderous act.

Returning to this theme two days later in an article suggestively titled "A Portion of Guilt for All," Reston asserted that there was "a rebellion in the land against law and good faith, and . . . private anger and sorrow are not enough to redeem the events of the last few days." He went on to cite a sermon delivered on November 24 by a Washington clergyman who, linking President Kennedy with Jesus, told his congregation that "We have been present at a new crucifixion. All of us had a part in the slaying of the President."

This idea, too—that the nation as a whole was finally to blame for the assassination—came to be repeated widely and incorporated into the public's understanding of the event. Liberals in particular tended to see Kennedy's death in this light, that is, as an outgrowth of a violent or extremist streak in the nation's culture. Yet doing so required its own species of doublethink, for the fact is that Oswald was not in any way a representative figure. He played no role in any domestic extremist movement. His radicalism was wholly un-American and anti-American. Even as a Communist or radical, he was *sui generis*. There was nothing about Oswald that even remotely reflected any broader pattern in American life.

Something strangely similar to this act of men-

tal contortion would occur five years later in response to the assassination in Los Angeles of Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Once again, many pointed to a national culture of violence and extremism as the ultimate cause of the killing. Jacqueline Kennedy herself, according to several biographers, was sufficiently shocked by this second assassination in her family that she resolved to live abroad with her children. Yet Senator Kennedy was killed by a Palestinian Arab, Sirhan Sirhan, who had resolved to act when he heard Kennedy express support for Israel while campaigning for the presidency in California. Sirhan represented more the hatreds of the world from which he had emigrated than any impulse in American culture.

STILL ANOTHER curiosity in the wake of the assassination was the transformation of the image of Kennedy himself. Though very much a characteristic liberal of his day, as we have seen, he came to be portrayed as a liberal hero of a very different sort—a leader who might have led the nation into a new age of peace, love, and understanding. Such a portrayal was encouraged by tributes and memorials inspired by friends and members of the Kennedy family as well as by the numerous books published after the assassination, particularly those by the presidential aides Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (*A Thousand Days*, 1965) and Theodore Sorensen (*Kennedy*, 1965).

The most potent element of this image-making was, of course, the now inescapable association of Kennedy with the legend of King Arthur and Camelot. This was the invention of Jacqueline Kennedy, who a week after her husband's death pressed the idea upon the journalist Theodore H. White in the course of an interview that would serve as the basis for an article by him in *Life* magazine. White later regretted the role he had played in transmitting this romantic image to the public. "Quite inadvertently," he wrote in his memoir, *In Search of History* (1978), "I was her instrument in labeling the myth."

White's short essay in *Life* contained a number of Mrs. Kennedy's wistful remembrances, one of which was the President's fondness for the title tune from the Lerner & Lowe Broadway hit, *Camelot*. His favorite lines, she told White, were these: "Don't let it be forgot,/that once there was a spot,/for one brief shining moment/that was Camelot." "There will be great Presidents again," she continued, "but there will never be another Camelot again." According to Mrs. Kennedy, her husband was an idealist who saw history as the

work of heroes, and she wished to have his memory preserved in the form of appropriate symbols rather than in the dry and dusty books written by historians. Camelot was one such symbol; the eternal flame that she had placed on his grave was another.

Significantly, Mrs. Kennedy's notion of Arthurian heroism derived not from Sir Thomas Mallory's 15th-century classic *Le Morte d'Arthur* but from *The Once and Future King* (1958) by T.H. White (no relation to the journalist), on which the musical was based. White's telling of the saga pokes fun at the pretensions of knighthood, pointedly criticizes militarism and nationalism, and portrays Arthur as a new kind of hero: an idealistic peacemaker seeking to tame the bellicose passions of his age. This may be one reason why Mrs. Kennedy's effort to frame her husband's legacy in this way was widely regarded as a distorted caricature of the real Kennedy and something he himself would have laughed at. Aides and associates reported that they had never heard Kennedy speak either about *Camelot* the musical or about its theme song. Some of Mrs. Kennedy's friends said they had never even heard *her* speak about King Arthur or the play prior to the assassination.

According to Schlesinger, Mrs. Kennedy later thought she may have overdone this theme. Be that as it may, one has to give her credit for quick thinking in the midst of tragedy and grief—and also for injecting a set of ideas into the cultural atmosphere that would have large consequences. For not only did the *Camelot* reading of heroic public service cut liberalism off from its once-vigorous nationalist impulses but, if one accepted the image of a utopian Kennedy Camelot—and many did—then the best times were now in the past and would not soon be recovered. Life would go on, but America's future could never match the magical chapter that had been brought to a premature end. Such thinking drew into question the no less canonical liberal assumption of steady historical progress, and compromised the liberal faith in the future.

Without intending to do so, Mrs. Kennedy had put forth an interpretation of her husband's life and death that undercut mid-century liberalism at its core.

THE SUCCESS of the Kennedy myth bore still other troubling fruit for American liberalism. Kennedy had added something novel to the mix of our public life, skillfully managing to transcend his role as a politician to become a cultural figure in his own right—indeed, a celebrity. In this he was

most unlike other prominent political figures of the time.

Kennedy was young and articulate; he wore his hair long; he sailed and played touch football; he consorted with Hollywood stars and Harvard professors; he was even something of an intellectual, speaking in measured cadences and having won (with the assistance of his father) a Pulitzer Prize for *Profiles in Courage* (1955). Above all, he was rich. His wife, moreover, was beautiful and glamorous; she wore French fashions and even spoke French (and Spanish, too). The two Kennedy children were every bit as photogenic as their parents. The American people had never seen anything like the Kennedys, except in the movies.

Kennedy was thus our first President and—with the partial exception of Bill Clinton—the only one so far successfully to marry the role of politician to that of cultural celebrity. Such a thing would never have occurred to Harry Truman or Franklin Roosevelt. As for Ronald Reagan, who moved in the opposite direction, out of the world of celebrity into politics, he never exercised the influence over that world that Kennedy did. Indeed, Kennedy's earlier success in linking liberalism with celebrity was greatly responsible for turning Hollywood into the liberal-Left fortification that it is today.

Kennedy achieved this through a style that gave the appearance of a man at the cutting edge of new cultural trends, in contrast to other politicians (like Nixon or Eisenhower) who generally represented the established patterns and morals of middle-class life. In his memoir, Sorensen acknowledges that at the inauguration, Kennedy deliberately played up this purely stylistic contrast between himself and Eisenhower, his tired and aging predecessor. Schlesinger, for his part, sees in Kennedy's style a substantive statement in itself: "His coolness was itself a new frontier. It meant freedom from the stereotyped responses of the past. . . . It offered hope for spontaneity in a country drowning in its own passivity." Norman Mailer, the original "hipster," saw Kennedy as an "existential hero," a man who would courageously court death in quest of authentic experience.

But here is another curious twist. While Kennedy understood courage to involve facing down Communism or putting a man on the moon, Mailer was thinking in terms of what he called "a revolution in the consciousness of our time," a goal (whether laudable or not) far beyond the capacity of any political leader to deliver. It is true that Kennedy cultivated a style—a style whose charms were magnified a thousandfold by the newly potent

medium of television. But it is also obvious that many read far more into this style than was really there. Intellectuals, journalists, and significant cohorts of the college-educated young erroneously equated Kennedy's style with a bohemian rejection of the blandness and conformity of middle-class life, when it in fact reflected the ways of the American aristocracy to which he and his wife belonged. (So, in a somewhat different way, did his relentless pursuit of sex and use of drugs.)

In projecting their own hopes on to Kennedy, liberals like Schlesinger and cultural radicals like Mailer were redefining liberalism more in terms of a posture than in terms of a coherent body of ideas about government and politics. This, too, would have consequences. Because Kennedy embodied sophistication, he was seen after his death as more "authentic" than such otherwise authentically liberal figures as Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey, who labored for legislative victories but were otherwise hopelessly old-fashioned. In appearing to stand above and apart from the conventions of middle-class life, he was seen as having opened up possibilities for a different kind of politics, sparking impulses that would eventually be absorbed into the mainstream of liberal thought. Within a few years of Kennedy's death, liberals had come to be more preoccupied with cultural issues—feminism, sexual freedom, gay rights—than with the traditional concerns that had animated Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy himself.

Kennedy's had been a unique balancing act, combining ardent patriotism with hip sophistica-

tion in a mix that could appeal both to traditional Americans and to the new cultural activists. After his death, these two groups divided into conflicting camps, thereby establishing the terms for the long-running culture war that continues today. As much as anything else, the immersion in cultural politics in the years following the assassination may have helped bring about the end of the liberal era.

KENNEDY'S ASSASSINATION heralded a break with the American past and a corresponding rupture in the evolving world of liberal ideas. Far from spurring the liberal tradition forward, as some today still suggest, it played a significant role in its disintegration. In the years and decades that followed, nearly all of the tendencies of the far Right that had so unnerved the liberals of the 1950's—the fascination with conspiracies, the use of overheated and abusive rhetoric to characterize political adversaries, expressions of hatred for the United States and its national culture—moved across the political spectrum to the far and then the near Left.

For many American liberals, the shock of Kennedy's death compromised their faith in the nation itself. Against all evidence, they concluded that a violent strain in our national culture was somehow to blame. A confident, practical, and forward-looking philosophy with a heritage of accomplishment was thus turned into a doctrine of pessimism and self-blame, with a decidedly dark view of American society. Such assumptions, far from marking a temporary adjustment to the events of the 1960's, have proved remarkably durable.