

MEMO

To: Jeremy Gunn, Laura Denk
From: Nabeena Chatterjee
Subject: Public Opinion : JFK assassination
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Public opinion of the assassination of John F. Kennedy

In the days immediately following the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the vast proportion of public opinion polls were directed at gauging the emotions and behavior of Americans, but some questions probed for opinions on the assassin, the assassin's killer, and the main causes of Kennedy's untimely death. Prepared in haste, the questions were broad, not focused, but they do provide some measure of the public's perspective.

There was no agreement about who bore ultimate responsibility for the assassination. Upon first hearing that the President had been shot, four out of five people named an immediate suspect. About half suspected a fanatic, and 29% specifically referred to mental illness.¹ Others mentioned ideological causes. Close to a quarter of the public accused Communists, Castroite or other leftists but only 12% believed it to be the work of a segregationist or right-winger.² Blacks were the only exception--a third "suspected an ideological motive...2 out of 3 blamed a segregationist; whites, whether North or South, pro-Kennedy or anti-, were much more likely to attribute the deed to a Communist or Castro supporter."³

Although many of the questions featured on the survey were general, there were some specific questions such as "What was the first thing that came to your mind concerning who or what organization did it?" In the sample, 83% offered one person or organization they felt was responsible for the shooting. Out of this group, 30% mentioned more than one possible assassin. The chart below separates the responses to the question into eight categories of assailants:⁴

¹Public Opinion Quarterly, 1964, Vol. 28 No.2, 194.

²Ibid., 195.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 220.

Suspect	Percent Mentioning	

Mentally ill person	33	
Segregationist	27	
Rightist	20	
Communist	15	
“Crackpot”	15	
Cuba/Castro	6	
Radical	5	
Left	4	

Analysis of these results by pollsters reveals that there was a direct correlation between who was assigned blame and the political affiliation of the respondent. The geographical location of the shooting was grounds for suspicion that particular interest groups had plotted the assassination. Even though most thought the culprit was a mentally ill person, the segregationist and right-winger were not far behind on the list of potential suspects. Looking at the immediate suspicions of Democratic and Republican respondents, 43% of Democrats mentioned right-wingers, while only 6% of Republicans did so. In contrast, 38% of Republicans mentioned segregationists compared to 10% of Democrats. This result is directly based on political belief because northern Republicans would rather have had the assassin be a segregationist than a right-winger with close ties to the party.

The impact of political affiliation on reactions to Kennedy’s assassination is further evidenced by responses to questions about who respondents hoped would be held accountable. Replies consisted of remarks about people whom they hoped were not responsible:⁵

<i>Republican Respondents</i>		<i>Democratic Respondents</i>	
069	I hoped it wasn’t an American.	066	I just hoped it wasn’t a Negro--think of the repercussion then!
070	I hoped it would not be an American	091	I hoped it would not be a Negro and generally hoped it was not an American.
030	Fear that it would be contributed to the right.	092	Hoped no organization could be blamed--especially not left.
029	Someone who was truly un-American in nature, belief and spirit.	007	Just that it wasn’t a U.S. citizen, as that is barbaric.
035	President Kennedy was to speak against the “right-wing.” Therefore I was afraid it might be a right-wing radical.		<i>Independent Respondents</i>
044	I hope that no American organization	059	Hoped it was not a Negro

⁵Ibid., 221.

081 can be responsible for such a tragic occurrence. I do not wish to think that Americans object in a manner such as this. I hoped that whoever had done it hadn't been a Communist or foreigner or a conservative. 088 Anyone except colored or Texan

As the chart above shows, Republicans were protective of the American, the right-winger and the conservative whereas the Democrats were concerned for the Negro (mentioned in 6 responses), the American, and the left. Pollsters correctly identified the reasons behind this type of response: “The absence of Republican mention of concern for the Negro at this time suggests that when one’s ideological position is threatened, concern for other causes is pre-empted. Only the person whose sympathies did not lie with the threatened position gave attention to the potential threat to a minority group.”⁶

Although political belief heavily influenced public opinion of Kennedy’s assassination, the same was not true of his alleged assassin. Rather, people responded according to their moral values. Just after Oswald’s assassination, pollsters recorded a surprising public confidence in the judicial system. Although almost 11% of respondents thought he deserved to be shot, nine-tenths regretted his murder.⁷ Out of this 90%, one-third expressed sorrow because Oswald would not receive due process or a fair trial and another third thought that now it would be impossible to find out the truth.⁸ When asked their opinion of Jack Ruby, a 53% majority replied that “he should stand trial, receive due process and let the court decide his fate.” A fifth thought he should be punished like everyone else, 4% thought that he should either be released or punished lightly and 15% thought he should be executed. Despite the enormity of the crimes, people exhibited their faith in the judicial system. A majority of 63% expected that Ruby would be treated fairly.

⁶Ibid., 222.

⁷Ibid., 211.

⁸Ibid., 204.

In addition to ascertaining the effect of political preference on public opinion and determining how people viewed Oswald's slayer, polls taken in the aftermath of the two killings attempted to elicit opinions on who thought Oswald was the assassin and whether he was perceived as the sole perpetrator. Those who blamed Oswald for the assassination offered possible motives. Amongst the 72% who were convinced that he was the assassin, a third cited mental illness, 16% attributed the deed to communism or leftist tendencies, and 3% thought the blame should be laid on right-wing sympathies. Twelve percent thought Oswald may have had a grudge against Kennedy or the government and another 12% noted that he seemed generally disgruntled and therefore sought revenge. The remaining people assumed that Oswald had been paid or was following orders.⁹

However, the fact that close to three-quarters of the public believed Oswald was culpable did not mean that the possibility of a conspiracy was decisively eliminated. Soon after the crisis occurred, only 24% of the public thought that all the responsibility for the assassination lay with one man; 62% believed that other people were involved as well, and 14% were unsure. The majority (81%) of those polled were firmly convinced that the target of the assassination was the President.¹⁰

⁹Ibid., 204.

¹⁰Ibid.

From the beginning, the lone assassin theory of Kennedy's death met with obstacles. In the first week after Kennedy's demise, a majority of Americans believed that "other people were involved." Most also assumed that the "slayings of Kennedy and his alleged assassin were the result of organized plotting." As poll analysts explain, conspiracy theory was very common during the McCarthy era and in subsequent years. It was particularly potent in this instance because not everyone takes mental illness as an adequate explanation for deranged behavior: "It takes a high degree of sophistication, Freud wrote, to believe in chance; primitive fears are allayed more easily by a devil theory of politics."¹¹ However, if this was the case, a paradoxical situation arises. If people really believed in conspiracy theory, why wasn't there a public outcry to "bring the malefactors to justice?" According to an NORC survey taken one month after the assassination, "hardly anyone mentioned the apprehension of the plotters as one of the most important problems facing the country." Reverting back to Freud's theory, a conspiracy is more readily understandable and acceptable. "It is hard for most people to understand the psychic processes of a mentally ill person who seemingly acts at random, much easier to ascribe the event to an organized conspiracy with a conscious goal." Second, the idea of not being able to hold mentally ill people accountable for their behavior is threatening. "Presumption of some sort of conspiracy removes some of the caprice from the situation and thus provides a less threatening interpretation, especially if one does not really take it too seriously."¹²

Studies of public opinion in the five years immediately following the assassination of John F. Kennedy yield similar conclusions. State-specific polls from 1964 show that residents were doubtful that the Warren Commission Report had provided the full account of what happened and who was responsible. In Michigan, 58.6% were left with unanswered questions and an additional 15.7% were unsure whether or not the Warren Commission Report was complete.¹³ The same survey taken in September of that year from Wisconsin residents shows

¹¹Ibid., 212.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Institute for Research in Social Science, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Harris Poll,

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54.7% having unanswered questions and 15.3% unsure.¹⁴ When all voters were asked whether they had unanswered questions, 45.2% said yes whilst 44.7% felt that the Commission report gave the full story.¹⁵ Three years later however, it appeared that the public had growing doubts about the Commission findings. In January 1967, 59.8% of people age 18 or older thought that there were unanswered questions.¹⁶

1964.

¹⁴Ibid., September 1964.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., January 1967.

Other featured questions in polls elicited similar responses. The more time elapsed, the more voters questioned whether the assassination was the work of only one man, Lee Harvey Oswald, or part of a larger conspiracy. According to a Gallup Poll taken on the day of the assassination, 29% thought that the assassin acted on his own, 52% felt that some group or element was also responsible and 19% were uncertain.¹⁷ In 1964, 18.8% of Connecticut residents were not sure if Lee Harvey Oswald was the man who shot President Kennedy.¹⁸ By September, 22.7% of Pennsylvania voters were unsure if Oswald was the sole culprit.¹⁹ Two years later, 26.1% of all voters aged 21 and older agreed that they were uncertain of the lone assassin theory.²⁰ A survey of the general public in 1966 showed that 36% believed one man was responsible, 64% were either unsure or thought that others were involved in the infamous plot. The fact that the public had doubts can be further evidenced by the results of a 1967 poll in which all voters were asked whether they thought the Garrison investigation in New Orleans would shed light on the Kennedy assassination. Respondents were almost evenly divided on the answer, 44% believing it would be useful, and 45.3% believing it to be useless. By 1968, close to three-quarters of the American public, 72.5% felt that the assassination was part of a broader plot.²¹

¹⁷Gallup Poll, November 22, 1963.

¹⁸Harris Poll, 1964.

¹⁹Ibid., September 1964. The same question posed in South Carolina showed that a slightly larger number of voters, 23.6%, were unsure that Oswald was the lone assassin.

²⁰Ibid., September 1966. A broader sample of the public, all people aged 18 and above, had this opinion in March 1968.

²¹Ibid., June 1968.

In the years following the assassination, public skepticism of the lone man theory was not due solely to a preference for a conspiracy theory as opposed to a fanatic killer, as pollsters in the mid-sixties implied. Rather, public opinion was channeled into disbelief through the efforts of those such as radio commentator Alan Stang, and research of private physician E. Forrest Chapman. Stang's 1976 article in the "American Opinion" details Chapman's findings and draws on the inaccuracies of the Warren Commission Report. Stang seeks to undermine the 'Magic Bullet' theory of the Warren Commission²². According to his work, the magic bullet is not a viable theory for several reasons. First, both Governor and Mrs. Connally insisted that he was hit by a second bullet and in Chapman's research, the angles of the wounds show that there were three different bullets. Second, even the Commission had problems with its findings. Although a fired bullet is usually mashed, "we are asked to believe that the bullet which smashed the heavy distal radius of the powerfully built John Connally emerged almost sufficiently to be fired again."²³ Third, the bullet that entered Connally's back had no fibers. It was therefore characterized as a "pristine bullet," a bullet which did not hit anyone else. The Zapruder film shows the maximum possible time between the wounding of the two victims. Chapman determined that this time was less than the minimum time needed to re-fire Oswald's rifle. Fourth, there were no traces of copper on Kennedy's shirt that from the bullet that left his throat, meaning that the bullet lacked enough velocity to have left such traces. Finally, Stang writes that according to Chapman, the higher the velocity of the bullet, the greater the amount of air in the wound. Since Connally's wound had a considerable amount of air, there should have been even more in Kennedy's wound since the bullet had higher velocity when it hit him. However,

²²Philadelphia Magazine, "Who Killed Kennedy? The Philadelphia Connection." Vol. 68, September 1977, 143. "Basically, the single bullet theory contends that there was one gunman firing one rifle from the rear of the Texas School Book Depository and that one of his bullets went through Jack Kennedy and then emerged and entered Governor John Connally of Texas, shattering his wrist and thigh. The bullet then exited for good, virtually intact, with no visible signs of its contact with bone, muscle and sinew."

²³American Opinion, "They Killed the President." Vol. 19, February 1976, 4.

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Kennedy's wound contained very little air.²⁴

²⁴Ibid., 6.

The preponderance of evidence against the accuracy of the Warren Commission Report appears to have left an indelible imprint on public opinion. Polls taken in the late 1970's showed that “80% of the American people consider[ed] this [magic bullet] theory utter lunacy.”²⁵ Full-length articles on the batched work of the Warren Commission such as one by Mike Mallowe in Philadelphia Magazine bolstered this opinion. Mallowe offers a barrage of witnesses who were killed either prior to or immediately upon testimony,²⁶ as well as selected clips from statements made by two women close to Oswald, his wife Marina, and her friend, Ruth Paine. Marina Oswald is reported to have admitted that “she really thought he had killed Kennedy...as soon as she heard that the shots may have come from the Texas School Book Depository...her husband had tried to assassinate a right-wing general just weeks before and had planned other assassinations as well.”²⁷ Although Paine initially thought it inconceivable that Oswald could have been responsible for the shooting, she later recanted, commenting “Lee seemed a little too flaky to me. If you didn’t agree with exactly what he had to say, he had no use for you. He may have been a secret agent...but I can tell you this, if I were the CIA I never would have hired him. He wasn’t stable.”²⁸

²⁵Philadelphia Magazine, 143.

²⁶Ibid., 236. “[T]wo of the Schweiker Committee’s most informative witnesses and most reliable living links between the CIA and the Mafia, Sam Giancana of Chicago and John Roselli of Miami were brutally executed just before, as in Giancana’s case, and just after, as in Roselli’s case, their closed-door testimony.”

²⁷Ibid., 142.

²⁸Ibid, 140.

Despite a plethora of evidence against the accuracy of the Warren Commission Report, including research by prominent Philadelphia attorney William Coleman,²⁹ and part of an FBI log recording Michael Paine saying to his wife “*We both know who was responsible,*”³⁰ the public did not favor another investigation. Specifically asked whether there should be another investigation in a December 1966 Gallup Poll, 63% replied no.³¹ Mallowe’s article considers the reasons for this opinion. First, the people appeared to agree with Warren Commission member Harold Weisberg that “it was time to close doors, not to open them.”³² Second, the Garrison debacle caused doubt about the success of further inquiries. “Congressional investigators now acknowledge privately that Garrison, the martyred New Orleans district attorney, was definitely on the right track in his efforts to pin the assassination on dignified old Clay Shaw and his cohorts, almost all of whom would eventually turn out to be CIA contract employees, anti-Castro Cuban exile sympathizers or Mafia henchmen. But, at the time, Jim Garrison was pilloried as the Joe McCarthy of his era;...and the national incentive to find out who really killed Kennedy was abandoned.”³³ Third, a string of similarly shocking events dampened the initial response to Kennedy’s fate: “In rapid succession the Vietnam War, Nixon and Watergate, plus other equally stunning, equally sensational assassinations--Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King and the wounding of George Wallace--numbed the public and the press to

²⁹Ibid., 230. According to Coleman, “The exact day that the Warren Commission officially had Lee Harvey Oswald in Mexico trying to get a visa to go to Cuba or Russia, Miss Odio [a young Cuban exile] swore that she had been present at a meeting in Dallas where Oswald and some anti-Castro Cubans had talked about assassinating Jack Kennedy in revenge for his shakeup of the CIA’s Cuban operation and his supposed bungling of the Bay of Pigs invasion...everything Miss Odio claimed--times, dates, places--thoroughly checked out.”

³⁰Ibid. “[Michael Paine] was heard to comment that he felt sure that Lee Harvey Oswald had killed the President, but did not feel that he was responsible.”

³¹Gallup Poll, December 8-13, 1966.

³²Philadelphia Magazine, 234.

³³ Ibid.

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the one-aching sting of the memory of Jack Kennedy's murder."³⁴

³⁴Ibid.

The dearth of polls on public opinion of the assassination throughout the seventies and eighties is surprising given that such questions were again featured in surveys from 1990 onwards. In a comparison of approval ratings of past presidents, Kennedy received an 84% rating.³⁵ Gallup Poll analysts note that “Kennedy, whose 71% average approval rating while in office were the highest recorded since Franklin Roosevelt, has continued to improve over time, gaining another 13 points. Kennedy has achieved almost mythic stature twenty-seven years after his assassination, with a phenomenal 84% now approving of his 1,000 day administration.”³⁶ Thirty years after his assassination, a record 75% believe that others were involved in a conspiracy³⁷ to murder Kennedy as opposed to 64% in 1966. It remains to be seen what effect public perception of Kennedy’s presidency and of his assassination will have on their willingness to consider another investigation worthwhile.

³⁵Gallup Poll, November 8-11, 1990.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Gallup Poll, 1994.