

THE CRIME OF HIS TIME

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SO, COMES NOW NORMAN MAILER IN THE YEAR 1995, to the High Court of Public Opinion, as he inevitably must, to wrestle with the tantalizing and sublime mystery of Lee Harvey Oswald. His pleading is entitled, *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*.

Could it be otherwise for the man who took it upon himself to chronicle and interpret the zeitgeist of the American 1960s than to light at last—thirty-two years after the fact—on the subject matter that, perhaps more than any other, determined the very nature of the zeitgeist? We are talking, of course, of that pinpoint moment, just before 12:30 p.m. Central Standard Time on November 22, 1963 in Dallas, Texas when everything changed forever. It took some time for this reality to sink in, for the march of history to catch up with the moment, but once it did, it caught up with a holy vengeance; a vengeance of near biblical proportions. The perceived cover-ups of CIA involvement in the murder, of Mafia involvement, of shady corporation involvement, the performance of the ham-handed Warren Commission, the newfound skepticism of government motives, and a president who felt a need to finish what his predecessor had begun in Southeast Asia, all contributed toward blowing out the foundations upon which a generation was built and substituted the flimsiest of materials. Skepticism regarding the Warren Report became its own litmus test of intellectual seriousness.

But for the death of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and the ascendancy of Lyndon Baines Johnson, how different it all might have been, how different we all might have been—the Butterfly Effect redoubling on itself down through the decades.

I came in on the trailing edge of that generation: children of the 1960s who grew up idealistic enough to believe that anything was possible and cynical enough to believe that nothing was true. It is from that background that

I come to this examination, as well as from my perspectives as a Mailer devotee, a novelist, a writer on true crime, criminal justice and behavioral profiling and, particularly, as one of the cohort who remembers exactly where they were and what they were doing upon hearing that President Kennedy had been shot. Each of these qualifications, of course, brings its own biases, for at this remove, the subject is its own cultural Rorschach test that cannot be approached with any reasonable claim to objectivity.

The word “Tale” in the title, it seems to me, is crucial to the understanding of what Mailer is trying to do with this book or, as some critics have suggested, *two* books: the first covering Oswald’s sojourn in the Soviet Union and the second his return to the United States. In fact, Mailer divides the work into two related “volumes.” Volume One is entitled, *Oswald in Minsk with Marina*; Volume Two, *Oswald in America*. By relating the story of Lee Harvey Oswald’s adult life—where he went, what he did and who he met—Mailer hopes to shed light on the two critical questions that everyone has been asking since the day Oswald himself was gunned down in full view of the television public: Did he do it? And, if so, why?

Because the author is the most audacious literary gunslinger of the age, there is always the risk, the compulsive gambler’s instinct, to bet it all on each roll of the dice. As with his oft-expressed notion that sex is not complete, is not the total existential act, without the element of sin and guilt, so the literary adventure he sets for himself is meaningless without the very real possibility of failure. He has done it over and over again—to brilliant effect in *The Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner’s Song*, to cite but two examples, and not so successfully in a number of others. But one of the many factors that solidified my tremendous admiration for Mailer, the palpable sense of excitement in his work, was just that sense of risk; that good writers should never rest on their laurels or fall back on the thing that worked last time. Whatever new book or article came out with his name on it, I always knew Mailer would be leading with his chin.

And with this monumental examination of Oswald’s short and unhappy life, it is as if he has doubled down, knowing well the difficulties he has set for himself. Like a literary Shackleton advertizing the perilousness of the mission, he undertakes this adventure with little professed hope of success, at least so far as the term is commonly used. In fact, after we have accompanied him for more than five hundred pages, he stops to point out, “It is worth remembering that in life, as in other mysteries, there are no answers,

only questions, but part of the pleasure of intellection is to refine the question, or discover a new one" (Mailer 515–16).

Mailer, with his enterprising and resourceful sidekick Lawrence Schiller—who had previously put together the *Executioner* project—travelled to Russia and spent months revisiting Oswald's haunts in Moscow and Minsk, interviewing numerous people with whom he had come in contact, and examining newly opened KGB files. Their research finds are impressive, virtually a day-to-day account of Oswald's actions and of those in his orbit. We read about his relationship with the Intourist guides, his half-hearted suicide attempt when informed he couldn't stay beyond his visa, his parsimonious and quotidian routine, his pursuit of women, and his eventual courtship and almost immediately troubled marriage to Marina Nikolayevna Prusakova, a pretty and flirtatious pharmacy student. In truth, Mailer's and Schiller's most interesting finds cast greater light on Soviet-American relations during this phase of the Cold War than they do on Oswald personally.

One particularly striking revelation is the amount of attention the Soviet intelligence apparatus devoted to such a non-noteworthy expatriate as Oswald. Apparently, they just could not figure out why a young American ex-Marine would want to relocate to Russia, except to spy. So they went to elaborate lengths to bug him, tail him, get reports and debriefs about him, all to try to figure out his game. When he courted and married Marina, was that part of the CIA's overall plan for planting Oswald in the midst of Soviet society? Verbatim KGB transcripts detail their moments of passionate love-making as well as their far more frequent passionate arguments and marital spats. Mailer quotes liberally from these transcripts.

But the conclusion the "Organs"—as the intelligence services were colloquially known—ultimately came to is that far from being a spy, Oswald was some poor, innocuous schlep who knew he was dissatisfied with his lot in life, but not much more. Dissatisfied with capitalism and its lack of place for him, he had dreamed of becoming part of the great socialist experiment that the Soviet Union represented. Once there, however, sent from Moscow to the Byelorussian city of Minsk and assigned to drudge work in a backwater radio factory, he realized that the vast, cold Russian collectivist bureaucracy offered no more than capitalism. So he petitioned to return to his native land, along with Marina and their baby, June Lee. Save for the addition of wife and child, the twenty-year-old, dyslexic, poorly-educated

product of a weirdly dysfunctional family with an undistinguished Marine Corp stint behind him, left the Soviet Union as a twenty-two-year-old of roughly the same description.

And here, I fear, is the rub. As illuminating as it is on a general level, as intriguing as the “Russified” English style is that Mailer creates, as much as it provides fascinating insights into various Soviet types, the extended Russian section of *Oswald’s Tale* doesn’t have all that much to do with the character’s outcome or the crime for which he became infamous. After reading through all of this, we have to ask ourselves, had Oswald not spent these two years in the Soviet Union, might the story have turned out essentially the same? Even keeping in mind all of the vagaries of the Butterfly Effect, the answer, as Hamlet so succinctly put it, is, “Very like.”

Let us be plain here. While the material on Oswald’s life in Moscow and Minsk effectively portrays a slice of the grim, gray life in the 1950s-1960s Soviet Union, it is hardly determinative in its detail regarding its protagonist. Mailer can get away with things lesser writers cannot. If he wants to show off his voluminous research into Soviet life of the time through 315 densely packed pages, then by God and by Norman, he will, and blue pencils be damned.

For Volume Two, he took a somewhat different tack, explaining, “That gap of three decades [between the assassination and the opening up of Russian society, during which there was little public debate] which had been an asset in Minsk would prove a liability in America” (Mailer 351). Instead, he quotes extensively from other sources, rather than straight reportage, in coming up with his own interpretation of events and motives, most notably the twenty-six volumes of the Warren Commission itself and Priscilla Johnson McMillan’s 1977 joint biography, *Marina and Lee*. Mailer says,

An attempt to come to grips with the full twenty-four years of Lee Harvey Oswald’s life seems in order, then. We have an advantage, after all! What was previously the dry material of the Warren Commission Hearings takes on more life because of our knowledge of Oswald’s behavior in Minsk. (Mailer 352)

Mailer goes on, falling back on his once-characteristic third-person self-referencing:

This will hardly prove to be the limit of his task. The second volume is also, as advertised, replete with speculation. How else can one deal with the leading actor? After all, Oswald was a secret agent. There is no doubt about that. The only matter unsettled is whether he was working for any service larger than the power centers in the privacy of his mind. (352)

Fair enough, except for one nagging problem. To achieve this, to settle this “matter,” to justify devoting some 791 pages of text to “the question,” it is necessary to elevate Oswald the individual to the enormity of the crime. This, in effect, becomes the moral equivalent of conspiracy theory in that it tries to explain our national trauma and give it some dimension beyond merely the act of a deranged and inadequate loner.

That feeling of inadequacy, of course, is at the very heart of the defining act, as it almost always is. But for the moment, let us deal with the phenomenon of conspiracy theory itself, for certainly it is at the root of our collective obsession with the Kennedy murder and thus the motive cause for Mailer himself to embark upon this journey.

“So long as Oswald is a petty figure,” Mailer himself points out,

[A] lone twisted pathetic killer who happened to be in a position to kill a potentially great President, then, as has been argued earlier in this work, America is cursed with an absurdity. There was no logic to the event and no sense of balance in the universe. Historical absurdity (like the war in Vietnam) breeds social disease. (606)

Two paragraphs later he poses the central question:

Did Lee Harvey Oswald kill JFK, and if he did, was he a lone gunman or a participant in a conspiracy? (606)

It is as if by redeeming Oswald as a man of deep and compelling character he can redeem all of us who have suffered for the crime. He nets it out even further in the next paragraph:

If a figure as large as Kennedy is cheated abruptly of his life, we feel better, inexplicably better, if his killer is also not without size. Then, to some degree, we can also mourn the loss of possibility in the man who did the deed. Tragedy is vastly preferable to absurdity. Such is the vested interest that adheres to perceiving Oswald as a tragic and infuriating hero (or, if you will, anti-hero) rather than as a snarling little wife abuser or a patsy. (607)

But that, in the end, is just what Oswald was. And what Mailer does manage to show us through both volumes of *Oswald's Tale*, I would suggest, is that this character who was unhappy with the American capitalist system, turned out to be equally unhappy with the Soviet socialist system, as he would have been with the Cuban revolution-oriented system, had he ultimately been allowed to emigrate there as he wished. And that is why Mailer cannot make *Oswald's Tale* into *The Executioner's Song*, no matter how much effort, no matter how much detail he puts into it.

In preparing for this piece, I went back to the original reviews, which were decidedly mixed. What surprised me far more than the bundle of raves and brickbats that often greeted a Mailer work were the repeated descriptions of Oswald as “complex” and “deep.” Huh? What am I missing? I just don't get it.

The portrait Mailer paints as Oswald's own self-image is the typical one assassins project—of losers convinced of their own greatness and entitlement, who know they will be lauded by history for this great act that will put society back on the right track. The problem is that Oswald's small and tawdry life does not lend itself to large questions, as does Gary Gilmore's equally sordid but more interesting and intellectually challenging existence. By insisting that the sentence of death handed down to him by a Utah jury and judge be carried out with all deliberate speed, Gilmore created high existential drama and challenged the basic integrity of our jurisprudential system and all of its related players. Oswald, on the other hand, remained a legitimate nobody until two days before his own untimely death and no effort of retroactively imposed moral gravitas can change that.

In his masterful essay on *The Executioner's Song*, Christopher Ricks extols Mailer for what we might call his negative capability: for not making any of the characters mouthpieces or surrogates for himself as author. But in *Oswald's Tale*, circumstances force him to do just the opposite and, if not

become a mouthpiece, at least serve as an emotional sounding board for what Oswald may have been thinking and feeling. The problem is, the banal and often pathetic Oswald is not up to being a Mailerian hero. In *Executioner*, Mailer illuminates a man determined to fulfill the destiny of his damned soul. In *Oswald*, he treats a man searching for his own exalted destiny within the milieus of the two superpowers he ultimately rejects. The word “soul” doesn’t come up much in any discussion of Lee Harvey Oswald. In *Executioner*, every character plays his or her own unique and vital role. Since 1963, an army of assassination theorists has been trying to connect all the characters into some kind of coherent mosaic, without notable success.

So instead of a protagonist who interacts with and affects an entire cast of characters around him, what emerges is a near archetypal case study of a social misfit, a personality that is one of the prime building blocks of the assassin personality.

As former Special Agent and FBI behavioral profiling pioneer John Douglas and I outlined in our 1999 book, *The Anatomy of Motive* (215–250), this assassin personality has been well studied and defined by law enforcement professionals in both the FBI and Secret Service, among other agencies, and forensically oriented psychiatrists. These personalities tend to be white male loners with self-esteem problems—no surprises there—and functional paranoiacs. By this we mean that they operate under a highly organized or methodical delusional system that helps them explain their marginalized social standing or position in society. In Oswald’s case, this was further fed by the books he devoured on Marxist and socialist theory. They have trouble keeping jobs and feel they are not appreciated for their true talents. They tend to latch on to “causes” that lend them some higher purpose. And indeed, Oswald became the entire New Orleans chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, an offshoot of the New York-based organization to which Mailer early lent his name. If Oswald couldn’t be a socialist hero in a country like Russia, well past its days of revolutionary fervor, then he would become one for Cuba, still in the midst of its revolution and facing his other nemesis, the big, bad USA. Yet in almost all cases except for the rare, rock-ribbed true believer, the political component is merely window dressing to justify the rage and violent behavior and the unfairness that the target is a celebrity or important person, and the potential assassin is not. There is strong evidence, detailed by Gus Russo and Stephen Molton in their definitive 2008 book, *Brothers in Arms: The Kennedys, the Castros, and the Politics*

of *Murder*, that both Marina and Lee identified heavily with Jack Kennedy. It is therefore reasonable to infer that one motivation for the murder was Oswald's psychological need to control/destroy the thing he could never be, a key component, for example, in Mark David Chapman's 1980 murder of John Lennon (Douglas and Olshaker, *Obsession* 234–235). And like Chapman, Oswald was at least perceptive enough to understand what every would-be assassin understands: that the act, if successful, will twin him forever with the great or evil personage whose life he robs. And for most of these guys, that is sufficient reward in itself.

It is striking how many assassin types choose their targets for completely capricious reasons, or change their focus once the quest begins. Arthur Bremer, who gunned down and permanently paralyzed Alabama Governor George Wallace in Laurel, Maryland, during the 1972 Presidential primary season, had first set his sights on President Richard Nixon. When he found that the chief executive's security was too tight, he settled for a more accessible nationally known figure. Likewise, Oswald first tried to assassinate local Texas right-winger and vociferous anti-communist General Edwin Walker and Oswald was despondent when the attempt got virtually no press coverage.

Assassins are often gun fetishists, another means of empowering an inadequate personality. Remember the image of Oswald posed in his backyard proudly, brandishing his Italian-made Mannlicher Carcano 6.5 bolt-action clip-fed rifle. Diaries are common, going back at least to the days of John Wilkes Booth, as witness Bremer and Robert Kennedy's killer Sirhan B. Sirhan. And here again, Lee Oswald fits the bill. Mailer gives us a good flavor of the bland and poorly-written nature of the entries, peppered with the occasional vehement rant.

With regard to Oswald being involved in a larger effort, let me take the liberty of quoting myself in *The Anatomy of Motive*:

Oswald's not the kind of person you'd bring into a conspiracy, even as a dupe, because you couldn't trust him. If you're an agent of some sort, you're not going to try to develop someone like Oswald. He's too unreliable, too unpredictable, too much of a flake. He's got too many personal problems, plus he's not that smart. I don't believe that any secret cabal could have known enough about behavioral psychology back in 1963 to choose

someone who so perfectly conformed to the lone assassin profile to be their front man. (249)

So the larger mystery, perhaps, is that there has been so much doubt all these years about the perpetration of the crime. Again, let us be straightforward: All evidence points to Lee Harvey Oswald having done the deed and having acted alone—personality, proximity, ballistics, you name it. I don't expect to convince the hardcore doubters in an article of this length, but then neither have they been convinced by entire books that detail all of the compelling evidence and logic.

Could he possibly have accomplished the hit: a slowly moving target at 88 yards with benefit of a four-power scope? On a good day, certainly, as the Secret Service repeatedly demonstrated with their own tests and recreations. He was considered an average shot in the Marine Corps, but that still puts him far above the general population of shooters. And the oft-quoted 5.6-second window to get off the three shots is basically a made-up number whose background we need not deal with here. Even the so-called “magic bullet” of the ardent conspiracists has a logical explanation. Given how Kennedy and Texas Governor John Connolly were actually seated in the Lincoln limousine, it would have been a truly magic bullet if it had not struck Connolly. Mailer finally admits:

[E]ach bullet, and the wound it causes, has an inter-relationship as unique as a fingerprint or a signature By the logic of such an argument, the proof of the magic bullet is that it happened. One cannot introduce the odds after the fact. (*Oswald's Tale* 777)

Or, as one veteran homicide investigator once told me, “Every bullet is a magic bullet.” Trying to predict its path and ultimate effect after firing verges into the realm of chaos theory.

This only underscores the hard truth that most public tragedies, whether we are speaking of a bridge collapse, the accidental death of a celebrity, or the murder of a head of state, result not from one large factor, but from a *series* of elements going unpredictably wrong. They are built on a tenuous string of contingency. Had not the wrought iron tie bars on the Tay Rail Bridge not been badly designed and poorly maintained, had not the wind-loading considerations been better understood, had not a heavy train been passing over

just as a storm gust blew up, then seventy-five good Scottish souls would not have lost their lives in the Firth of Tay in December 1879. Had not Princess Diana and Dodi Fayed decided to leave the Ritz Hotel for his Paris apartment that night in August 1997, and had their inebriated driver not been trying to outrun the paparazzi, and had he not driven into that tunnel and swerved and had Diana been wearing a seat belt and had the French emergency services rushed her to the emergency room rather than trying to stabilize her on the scene and ... well, we all get the picture. By the same token, had not the tubercular Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip not despaired of shooting Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand after his compatriots missed with their bomb that June day in 1914, causing the motorcade to change plans and Princip to go get himself a sandwich, and had he not emerged from Schiller's Delicatessen just as the archduke's car was turning around in front of him to correct an unpredictable wrong turn, then World War I might not have been triggered and the entire history of the twentieth century would have been unrecognizably different. Again, to quote from *Anatomy*:

Any successful assassin has to get lucky. Oswald was lucky in many ways, among them that Kennedy directed that the clear bubble top not be placed on the presidential limousine. Another was that the president was wearing a brace for his bad back. Had he not been, he might have been thrown forward by the first bullet and out of the critical line of fire. It's always a confluence of unrelated coincidences. (249)

Take into account the coincidence of Oswald being fired from a job he liked and securing a lesser position at the Texas School Book Depository and then, as Mailer quotes Priscilla Johnson McMillan:

[T]he uncanny selection of a route that would carry the President right under his window could mean only one thing. Fate has singled him out to do the dangerous but necessary task which had been his destiny all along which would cause him to go down in history. (McMillan 573; qtd. in Mailer, *Oswald's Tale* 781)

If you add to that Oswald's well-established frustrated romantic overtures on the night of November 21 to a wife who is no longer living with him and

the anger and despair that might have engendered in an already angry and desperate individual, then you come to appreciate the kind of karmic capriciousness through which history often declares itself. This moment was Oswald's one last desperate stab at "normal" life and love, and Marina rebuffed him. In Mailer's universe, everyone is searching—vainly—for love, and if they don't find it in one form, they'll pursue it in another. As one person close to the investigation put it to me in a decidedly earthy syllogism, "If Oswald had gotten laid on Thursday night, JFK would have gotten laid on Friday night."

And it is in scenes like the aforementioned Marina's bedroom, despite the unredeemable shallowness of the character he has to work with, where Mailer is at his speculative literary and psychological best. After that unfortunate rejection, Mailer tells us:

Oswald has reached that zone of serenity that some men attain before combat, when anxiety is deep enough to feel like quiet exaltation: You are finally going into an action that will be equal in dimension to the importance of your life. (666)

As far as a conspiracy, anyone who has read *Harlot's Ghost*, Mailer's wonderful and unruly—and incomplete—epic novel of the CIA, must suspect that he cannot be more than half serious about such a bureaucratic behemoth being able to keep such a monumental secret. As to other groups—Mafia, corporate cabals, whatever—I think that has been effectively addressed by Gerald Posner (among others) in his 1993 book *Case Closed*, from which Mailer also liberally quotes. He didn't have the benefit of Vincent Bugliosi's exhaustively detailed book, *Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*, which essentially demolishes the conspiracy theories. He also didn't have Gus Russo's and Stephen Molton's *Brothers in Arms*, or Russo's earlier work on the assassination, *Live by the Sword*, though even if he had, I doubt they would have diverted Mailer from his course. At the beginning of Volume Two he writes:

Let me propose, then, that a mystery of the immense dimensions of Oswald's case will, in the writing, create a form of its own somewhere between fiction and non-fiction.... The author's musings become some of the operative instruments. Of course,

speculation is often an invaluable resource of the novelist. The result can be seen, therefore, as a special species of non-fiction that can be put under the rubric of *mystery*. (353)

Now, the terms “fiction” and “non-fiction” have certainly lost a large measure of their rigidity, at least since the publication of *The Armies of the Night* with its game-changing subtitle, *History as a Novel/The Novel as History*. It became, under Mailer’s alchemy, a completely elastic and protean description to be expropriated by a multitude of less talented writers for their own purposes. But with *Oswald*, even Mailer has to strain at the distinction in order to keep up a modicum of suspense regarding the central “mystery”; i.e., whether Oswald did it and whether anyone else was involved.

Mailer just can’t resist the temptation of the conspiracy theory—the better angel of any decent thriller novelist but a minefield for a non-fiction reporter. He indulges in all manner of wild speculation in an ongoing exercise that is akin to, and has roughly the same odds of success as, trying to prove who wrote Shakespeare’s plays. Dragging in the possibility that Oswald was an FBI informer, for example, even though there is no evidence to support it, is to cast the speculative net so wide that it loses any semblance of logic or appearance of serious investigation. We wade through a morass of “could haves,” “would haves” and “might haves” that go so far as to suggest Oswald’s homosexuality through the body position of a murdered fellow Marine that there is no evidence Oswald had anything to do with. I can imagine Mailer delighting at the very premise.

And, of course, the murder of Oswald by Jack Ruby under the very noses of the Dallas Police makes the case for conspiracy all the more enticing. That, in large measure, is the X-factor that transforms the story and adds to the tragedy the added dimension of paranoia. To his credit, Mailer does spend a chapter of considerable length exploring this possibility—mainly that the Mafia put Jack up to it—before concluding, along with Gerald Posner, that it just doesn’t add up. There were just too many variables involved, many having to do with Ruby chancing to be at the right place at the right time, like Princip getting his sandwich just as the archduke’s open car was correcting its wrong turn.

In the end, Mailer is willing to conclude that Ruby acted out of a combination of genuine admiration for President Kennedy, compassion for Jackie and wanting to save her the trauma of an Oswald trial, and as a response to

the vitriolic ad in the *Dallas Morning News* that had welcomed Kennedy to Dallas. That ad had been taken out by a Jewish member of the John Birch Society named Bernard Weissman and suggested that the president was a Communist supporter. Ruby was appalled when he saw the ad and fretted that it tarnished the entire Jewish community of Dallas. Mailer quotes Posner:

“If I had planned this I couldn’t have had my timing better,” [Ruby] bragged. “It was one chance in a million... I guess I just had to show the world that a Jew has guts.” (Posner 396–97; qtd. in Mailer 757)

Do these three sentiments make logical sense as a motive for shooting Oswald? Only within their own paranoid context. And that is just the point. Like Oswald, the down and out Ruby, on the verge of bankruptcy, was operating out of his own ethical/heroic fantasy. In fact, by the time Chief Justice Earl Warren goes to Dallas to interview him, Ruby’s Jewish persecution paranoia has reached the psychotic level (734–40).¹

And recognizing a great factoid, a term Norman invented in 1972 (*Marilyn* 18), when he hears one, Mailer concludes the chapter citing Posner’s quoting of a close friend who testified that Ruby would never have left his beloved dog Sheba in his car “if he knew he was going to shoot Oswald and end up in jail” (Posner 392; qtd. in Mailer, *Oswald’s Tale* 758). Sometimes, as Freud noted, “A cigar is just a cigar.” And sometimes, ordinary, practical considerations trump overarching conspiracies.

What Mailer does show is that once the assassination had taken place, numerous parties, while not in command of the whole truth or the big picture, certainly had their own reasons to want to stop others from getting any of it, lest it lead to what they feared might be the rest of the truth. The pro- and anti-Castro elements, the mob, the Soviets, all feared some of their own people might have been close enough to the action to maybe be involved. And if that were found out, there would be hell to pay. On the other hand, certain factions thought they could benefit by association. Mailer brings up *Mob Lawyer* by Frank Ragano, Santo Trafficante’s attorney. Ragano makes “it clear that [New Orleans mob kingpin Carlos] Marcello and Trafficante certainly wanted [Teamsters Union boss and Robert Kennedy archenemy] Jimmy Hoffa to believe they were responsible for the act” (Mailer 741).²

On one level, the great mystery at the center of the Oswald story is that there is any substantial mystery left at all. The evidence of this one man's involvement in the assassination is overwhelming on every level, and there has never been a credible piece of evidence linking any other individual or group to the murder. As far as I am concerned, Gus Russo, at first singly and then ten years later with Stephen Molton, has answered the final important questions, based on newly-released documents, eyewitness interviews and meticulously gathered and triangulated research. By filling in such gaps as what Oswald was doing in Mexico City in September 1963 and whom he met with, Russo confirms what Mailer can only speculate—that Oswald did have contact with Cuban officials and that he did express his intent, “to kill that bastard! I’m going to kill Kennedy!” (310). Contrary to the official line and general perception, the Kennedy administration had not curtailed their attempts to kill Castro and overthrow his regime after the peaceful settlement of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. It is therefore far from surprising that Cuban intelligence would be sympathetic to anyone offering to return the favor.

But perhaps the most interesting part of Russo’s narrative is that the Cubans, who had been informed originally about Oswald by the Russian secret service organs when he quit the Soviet Union, essentially took the declaration in stride, wished him luck, and never took him very seriously. He was not the kind of guy you would pick or rely on to carry out a high-level hit. Although, according to Russo, they did give him assurances that if he did manage to pull off the operation, they would be there to rescue him and whisk him off to Cuba, which might explain Oswald’s declaration after capture that he was a “patsy.”

Russo and Molton suggest, and this very well might be the case, that the Warren Commission was purposely kept in the dark and steered away from such critical avenues of inquiry as the Cuban connection because new President Lyndon Johnson and other high government officials were deeply worried that any suggestion that Castro and Cuba were behind the assassination would lead to a public bloodlust for the overthrow of the regime, which in turn would lead to another nuclear stakes confrontation with the Russians. Having seen how narrowly World War III was avoided just 13 months before, and being one of the few people in the administration old enough to remember World War I and the living hell that Gavrilo Princip unwittingly unleashed on Europe, it was a chance Johnson was not willing to take. The

result, unavoidably it seems, were the seeds of doubt that ultimately blossomed into full-blown distrust of the government and everything it undertook.

It is fascinating to note that this was an idea Mailer could easily wrap his mind around, and did so in the form of drama years before Russo collected the facts that could bear it out. For the April 1992 issue of *Vanity Fair*, Mailer penned a mordant two-character drama entitled, “Earl and Lyndon: An Imaginary Conversation,” in which he had the ever-persuasive LBJ strong-arm Chief Justice Warren into accepting the commission chairmanship to assure the public’s faith in government integrity. Once he gets Warren’s assurance, Johnson outlines all the areas the commission is to stay away from.

It is this kind of literary agitprop and street theater that takes us back to the Norman Mailer of the 1960s, of *The Armies of the Night*, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, and makes us remember why we wanted to rally around him. By the end of *Oswald’s Tale*, it is as if he has added his own coda to the era. The time for bombast, for conspiracies and paranoia and the storming of the barricades is over. Now is the time for sober reflection of an era that seems long ago.

Those of us even marginally old enough to remember will recall that the election of JFK was supposed to launch the New Frontier of the hopeful 1960s. As it turned out, it was actually JFK’s death that launched the 1960s and we were soon waist-deep in the Big Muddy. As he had before and would do again in his long and prodigious career, Norman Mailer tried mightily to make sense out of those years with *Oswald’s Tale*. But as he demonstrated so effectively in *Harlot’s Ghost*, which he quotes from in *Oswald* to support some of his own theses, history is elusive, even to those who have lived it. For the rest, it can be all but unknowable.

Unfortunately, hanging the mantle of the age on the thin shoulders of Lee Harvey Oswald is not a cloak even a tailor as gifted as Mailer can cut to fit this demonstrably small and unheroic figure. Wife abuser—certainly. Patsy—newly revealed aspects of the Cuban connection might lead one to believe so. But little more. The kindest term we might use in relation to Oswald would be something on the order of pathetic.

“Every insight we have gained of him suggests the solitary nature of his act,” Mailer finally admits (*Oswald’s Tale* 779).

Though it is painful to admit, the sad fact is that John F. Kennedy was killed by a no-count loser who becomes significant only in his perverse luck

and once-in-his-life effectiveness in destroying our collective hopes and dreams.

NOTES

1. There is also a good discussion of this aspect of Jack Ruby's personality in Gus Russo's *Live by the Sword*, page 499.
2. See Ragano and Raab, page 151, for further details.

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