

The Unz Review: An Alternative Media Selection

A Collection of Interesting, Important, and Controversial Perspectives Largely Excluded from the American Mainstream Media

American Pravda: The JFK Assassination, Part I - What Happened?

RON UNZ • JUNE 18, 2018 • 4,800 WORDS • 1,227 COMMENTS



About a decade ago, I got a Netflix subscription and was amazed that the Internet now provided immediate access to so many thousands of movies on my own computer screen. But after a week or two of heavy use and the creation of a long watch-list of prospective films I'd always wanted to see, my workload gained the upper hand, and I mostly abandoned the system.



Back then, nearly all Netflix content was licensed from the major studios and depending upon contract negotiations might annually disappear, so when I happened to browse my account again in December, I noticed that a couple of films on my selection list included warning notices saying they would no longer be available on January 1st. One of these was Oliver Stone's famous 1991 film *JFK*[1], which had provoked quite a stir at the time, so thinking now or never, I clicked the *Play* button, and spent three hours that evening watching the Oscar winner.

Most of the plot seemed bizarre and outlandish to me, with the president's killing in Dallas supposedly having been organized by a cabal of militantly anti-Communist homosexuals, somehow connected with both the CIA and the mafia, but based in New Orleans. Kevin Costner starred as a crusading District Attorney named Jim Garrison—presumably fictional—whose investigation broke the assassination conspiracy wide open before the subtle tentacles of the Deep State finally managed to squelch his prosecution; or at least that's what I vaguely remember from my single viewing. With so many implausible elements, the film confirmed my belief in the wild imagination of Hollywood scriptwriters and also demonstrated why no one with any common sense had ever taken seriously those ridiculous "JFK conspiracy theories."

Despite its dramatic turns, the true circumstances of President John F. Kennedy's death seemed an island of sanity by comparison. Lee Harvey Oswald, a disgruntled young marine had defected to the USSR in 1959 and finding life behind the Iron Curtain equally unsatisfactory, returned to America a couple of years later. Still having confused Marxist sympathies, he'd joined public protests supporting Fidel Castro's Cuba, and gradually turning toward violence, purchased a mail-order rifle. During the presidential visit, he had fired three shots from the Dallas School Book Depository, killing JFK, and was quickly apprehended by the local police. Soon, he too was dead, shot by an outraged Kennedy supporter named Jack Ruby. All these sad facts were later confirmed by the Warren Commission in DC, presided over by the U.S. Chief Justice together with some of America's most respected public figures, and their voluminous report ran nearly 900 pages.

Yet although the film seemed to have affixed an enormous mass of incoherent fictional lunacy on top of that basic history—why would a murder plot in Dallas have been organized in New Orleans, five hundred miles distant?—one single detail troubled me. Garrison is shown denouncing the “lone gunman theory” for claiming that a single bullet was responsible for seven separate wounds in President Kennedy and Texas Gov. John Connolly, seated beside him in the limousine. Now inventing gay CIA assassins seems pretty standard Hollywood fare, but I found it unlikely that anyone would ever insert a fictional detail so wildly implausible as that bullet's trajectory. A week or so later, the memory popped into my head, and I googled around a bit, discovering to my total astonishment that the seven-wounds-from-one-bullet claim was totally factual, and indeed constituted an absolutely essential element of the orthodox “single gunman” framework given that Oswald had fired at most three shots. So *that* was the so-called “Magic Bullet” I'd occasionally seen conspiracy-nuts ranting and raving about. For the first time in my entire life, I started to wonder whether maybe, just *maybe* there actually *had* been some sort of conspiracy behind the most famous assassination in modern world history.

Any conspirators had surely died of old age many years or even decades earlier and I was completely preoccupied with my own work, so investigating the strange circumstances of JFK's death was hardly a high personal priority. But the suspicions remained in the back of my mind as I diligently read my *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* every morning while periodically browsing less reputable websites during the afternoon and evening. And as a result, I now began noticing little items buried here and there that I would have previously ignored or immediately dismissed, and these strengthened my newly emerging curiosity.

Among other things, occasional references reminded me that I'd previously seen my newspapers discuss a couple of newly released JFK books in rather respectful terms, which had surprised me a bit at the time. One of them, still generating discussion, was *JFK and the Unspeakable* published in 2008 by James W. Douglass, whose name meant nothing to me. And the other, which I hadn't originally realized trafficked in any assassination conspiracies, was David Talbot's 2007 *Brothers: The Hidden History of the Kennedy Years*, focused on the relationship between John F. Kennedy and his younger brother Robert. Talbot's name was also somewhat familiar to me as the founder of *Salon.com* and a well-regarded if liberal-leaning journalist.

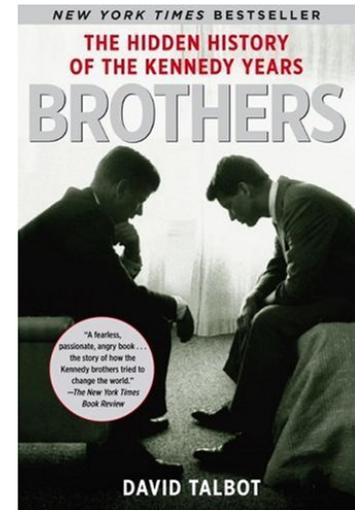
None of us have expertise in all areas, so sensible people must regularly delegate their judgment to credible third-parties, relying upon others to distinguish sense from nonsense.

Since my knowledge of the JFK assassination was nil, I decided that two recent books attracting newspaper coverage might be a good place to start. So perhaps a couple of years after watching that Oliver Stone film, I cleared some time in my schedule, and spent a few days carefully reading the combined thousand pages of text.

I was stunned at what I immediately discovered. Not only was the evidence of a “conspiracy” absolutely overwhelming, but whereas I’d always assumed that only kooks doubted the official story, I instead discovered that a long list of the most powerful people near the top of the American government and in the best position to know had been privately convinced of such a “conspiracy,” in many cases from almost the very beginning.

The Talbot book especially impressed me, being based on over 150 personal interviews and released by *The Free Press*, a highly reputable publisher. Although he applied a considerable hagiographic gloss to the Kennedys, his narrative was compellingly written, with numerous gripping scenes. But while such packaging surely helped to explain some of the favorable treatment from reviewers and how he had managed to produce a national bestseller in a seemingly long-depleted field, for me the packaging was much less important than the product itself.

To the extent that notions of a JFK conspiracy had ever crossed my mind, I’d considered the argument from silence absolutely conclusive. Surely if there had been the slightest doubt of the “lone gunman” conclusion endorsed by the Warren Commission, Attorney-General Robert Kennedy would have launched a full investigation to avenge his slain brother.



But as Talbot so effectively demonstrates, the reality of the political situation was entirely different. Robert Kennedy may have begun that fatal morning widely regarded as the second most powerful man in the country, but the moment his brother was dead and his bitter personal enemy Lyndon Johnson sworn in as the new president, his governmental authority almost immediately ebbed away. Longtime FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who had been his hostile subordinate, probably scheduled for removal in JFK’s second term, immediately became contemptuous and unresponsive to his requests. Having lost all his control over the levels of power, Robert Kennedy lacked any ability to conduct a serious investigation.

According to numerous personal interviews, he had almost immediately concluded that his brother had been struck down at the hands of an organized group, very likely including elements from within the U.S. government itself, but he could do nothing about the situation. As he regularly confided to close associates, his hope at the age of 38 was to reach the White House himself at some future date, and with his hands once again upon the levels of power then uncover his brother’s killers and bring them to justice. But until that day, he could do nothing, and any unsubstantiated accusations he made would be totally disastrous both for national unity and for his own personal credibility. So for years, he was forced to nod his head and publicly acquiesce to the official story of his brother’s inexplicable assassination at the hands of a lone nut, a fairy tale publicly endorsed by nearly the entire political establishment,

and this situation deeply gnawed at him. Moreover, his own seeming acceptance of that story was often interpreted by others, not least in the media, as his wholehearted endorsement.

Although discovering Robert Kennedy's true beliefs was a crucial revelation in the Talbot book, there were many others. At most three shots had allegedly come from Oswald's rifle, but Roy Kellerman, the Secret Service agent in the passenger seat of JFK's limousine, was sure there had been more than that, and to the end of his life always believed there had been additional shooters. Gov. Connolly, seated next to JFK and severely wounded in the attack, had exactly the same opinion. CIA Director John McCone was equally convinced that there had been multiple shooters. Across the pages of Talbot's book, I learned that dozens of prominent, well-connected individuals privately expressed extreme skepticism towards the official "lone gunman theory" of the Warren Commission, although such doubts were very rarely made in public or on the record.

For a variety of complex reasons, the leading national media organs—the commanding heights of "Our American Pravda"[2]—almost immediately endorsed the "lone gunman theory" and with some exceptions generally maintained that stance throughout the next half-century. With few prominent critics willing to publicly dispute that idea and a strong media tendency to ignore or minimize those exceptions, casual observers such as myself had generally received a severely distorted view of the situation.

If the first two dozen pages of the Talbot book completely overturned my understanding of the JFK assassination, I found the closing section almost equally shocking. With the Vietnam War as a political millstone about his neck, President Johnson decided not to seek reelection in 1968, opening the door to a last minute entry into the Democratic race by Robert Kennedy, who overcame considerable odds to win some important primaries. Then on June 4, 1968, he carried gigantic winner-take-all California, placing him on an easy path to the nomination and the presidency itself, at which point he would finally be in a position to fully investigate his brother's assassination. But minutes after his victory speech, he was shot and fatally wounded, allegedly by another lone gunman, this time a disoriented Palestinian immigrant named Sirhan Sirhan, supposedly outraged over Kennedy's pro-Israel public positions although these were no different than those expressed by most other political candidates in America.

All this was well known to me. However, I had not known that powder burns later proved that the fatal bullet had been fired directly behind Kennedy's head from a distance of three inches or less although Sirhan was standing several feet in front of him. Furthermore, eyewitness testimony and acoustic evidence indicated that at least twelve bullets were fired although Sirhan's revolver could hold only eight, and a combination of these factors led longtime LA Coroner Dr. Thomas Naguchi, who conducted the autopsy, to claim in his 1983 memoir that there was likely a second gunman. Meanwhile, eyewitnesses also reported seeing a security guard with his gun drawn standing right behind Kennedy during the attack, and that individual happened to have a deep political hatred of the Kennedys. The police investigators seemed uninterested in these highly suspicious elements, none of which came to light during the trial. With two Kennedy brothers now dead, neither any surviving members of the family nor most of their allies and retainers had any desire to investigate the details of this latest assassination, and in a number of cases they soon moved overseas, abandoning the country entirely. JFK's

widow Jackie confided in friends that she was terrified for the lives of her children, and quickly married Aristotle Onassis, a Greek billionaire, whom she felt would be able to protect them.

Talbot also devotes a chapter to the late 1960s prosecution efforts of New Orleans DA Jim Garrison, which had been the central plot of the *JFK* film, and I was stunned to discover that the script was almost entirely based on real life events rather than Hollywood fantasy. This even extended to its bizarre cast of assassination conspiracy suspects, mostly fanatically anti-Communist Kennedy-haters with CIA and organized crime ties, some of whom were indeed prominent members of the New Orleans gay demimonde. Sometimes real life is far stranger than fiction.

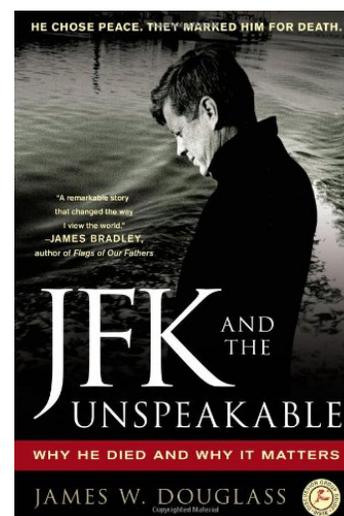
Taken as a whole, I found Talbot's narrative quite convincing, at least with respect to demonstrating the existence of a substantial conspiracy behind the fatal event.

Others certainly had the same reaction, with the august pages of *The New York Times Sunday Book Review* carrying the strongly favorable reaction of presidential historian Alan Brinkley. As the Allan Nevins Professor of History and Provost of Columbia University, Brinkley is as mainstream and respectable an academic scholar as might be imagined and he characterized Talbot as[3]

the latest of many intelligent critics who have set out to demolish the tottering credibility of the Warren Commission and draw attention to evidence of a broad and terrible conspiracy that lay behind the assassination of John Kennedy — and perhaps the murder of Robert Kennedy as well.

The other book by Douglass, released a year later, covered much the same ground and came to roughly similar conclusions, with substantial overlap but also including major additional elements drawn from the enormous volume of extremely suspicious material unearthed over the decades by diligent JFK researchers. Once again, the often bitter Cold War era conflict between JFK and various much harder-line elements of his government over Cuba, Russia, and Vietnam is sketched out as the likely explanation for his death.

Summarizing a half-century of conspiracy research, the Talbot and Douglass books together provide a wealth of persuasive evidence that elements of organized crime, individuals with CIA connections, and anti-Castro Cubans were probably participants in the assassination plot. Oswald seems to have been working with various anti-Communist groups and also had significant connections to U.S. intelligence, while his purported Marxism was merely a very thin disguise. With regard to the assassination itself, he was exactly the “patsy” he publicly claimed to be, and very likely never fired a single shot. Meanwhile, Jack Ruby had a long



history of ties to organized crime, and surely killed Oswald to shut his mouth.

Many others may have suffered a similar fate. Conspirators daring enough to strike at the president of the United States would hardly balk at using lethal means to protect themselves from the consequences of their action, and over the years a considerable number of individuals associated with the case in one way or another came to untimely ends.

Less than a year after the assassination, JFK mistress Mary Meyer, the ex-wife of high-ranking CIA official Cord Meyer, was found shot to death in a Washington DC street-killing with no indications of attempted robbery or rape, and the case was never solved. Immediately afterwards, CIA counterintelligence chief James Jesus Angleton was caught breaking into her home in search of her personal diary, which he later claimed to have destroyed.

Dorothy Kilgallen was a nationally-syndicated newspaper columnist and television personality, and she managed to wrangle an exclusive interview with Jack Ruby, later boasting to her friends that she would break the JFK assassination case wide open in her new book, producing the biggest scoop of her career. Instead, she was found dead in her Upper East Side townhouse, having apparently succumbed to an overdose of alcohol and sleeping pills, with both the draft text and the notes to her Jack Ruby chapter missing.

Shortly before Jim Garrison filed his assassination charges, his top suspect David Ferrie was found dead at age 48, possibly of natural causes, though the DA suspected foul play.

During the mid-1970s, the House Select Committee on Assassinations held a series of high-profile hearings to reopen and investigate the case, and two of the witnesses called were high-ranking mafia figures Sam Giancana and Johnny Rosselli, widely suspected of having been connected with the assassination. The former was shot to death in the basement of his home one week before he was scheduled to testify, and the body of the latter was found in an oil-drum floating in the waters off Miami after he had been subpoenaed for an additional appearance.

These were merely a few of the highest-profile individuals with a connection to the Dallas assassination whose lives were cut short in the years that followed, and although the deaths may have been purely coincidental, the full list is rather a long one.

Having read a couple of books that completely upended my settled beliefs about a central event of twentieth century America, I simply didn't know what to think. Over the years, my own writings had put me on friendly terms with a well-connected individual whom I considered a member of the elite establishment, and whose intelligence and judgment had always seemed extremely solid. So I decided to very gingerly raise the subject with him, and see whether he had ever doubted the "lone gunman" orthodoxy. To my total astonishment, he explained that as far back as the early 1990s, he'd become absolutely convinced in the reality of a "JFK conspiracy" and over the years had quietly devoured a huge number of the books in that field, but had never breathed a word in public lest his credibility be ruined and his political effectiveness destroyed.

A second friend, a veteran journalist known for his remarkably courageous stands on certain controversial topics, provided almost exactly the same response to my inquiry. For decades, he'd been almost 100% sure that JFK had died in a conspiracy, but once again had never written a word on the topic for fear that his influence would immediately collapse.

If these two individuals were even remotely representative, I began to wonder whether a considerable fraction, perhaps even a majority, of the respectable establishment had long harbored private beliefs about the JFK assassination that were absolutely contrary to the seemingly uniform verdict presented in the media. But with every such respectable voice keeping so silent, I had never once suspected a thing.

Few other revelations in recent years have so totally overturned my understanding of the framework of reality. Even a year or two later, I still found it very difficult to wrap my head around the concept, as I described in another note to that well-connected friend of mine:

BTW, I hate to keep harping on it, but every time I consider the implications of the JFK matter I'm just more and more astonished.

The president of the US. The heir to one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in America. His brother the top law enforcement officer in the country. Ben Bradlee, one of his closest friends, the fearless crusading editor of one of the nation's most influential media outlets. As America's first Catholic president, the sacred icon of many millions of Irish, Italian, and Hispanic families. Greatly beloved by top Hollywood people and many leading intellectuals.

His assassination ranks as one of the most shocking and dramatic events of the 20th century, inspiring hundreds of books and tens of thousands of news stories and articles, examining every conceivable detail. The argument from MSM silence always seemed absolutely conclusive to me.

From childhood, it's always been obvious to me that the MSM is completely dishonest about certain things and over the last dozen years I've become extremely suspicious about a whole range of other issues. But if you'd asked me a couple of years ago whether JFK was killed by a conspiracy, I would have said "well, anything's possible, but I'm 99% sure there's absolutely no substantial evidence pointing in that direction since the MSM would surely have headlined it a million times over."

Was there really a First World War? Well, I've always assumed there was, but who really knows?....

Our reality is shaped by the media, but what the media presents is often determined by complex forces rather than by the factual evidence in front of their eyes. And the lessons of the

JFK assassination may provide some important insights into this situation.

A president was dead and soon afterward his supposed lone assassin suffered the same fate, producing a tidy story with a convenient endpoint. Raising doubts or focusing on contrary evidence might open doors better kept shut, perhaps endangering national unity or even risking nuclear war if the trail seemed to lead overseas. The highest law enforcement officer in the country was the slain president's own brother, and since he seemed to fully accept that simple framework, what responsible journalist or editor would be willing to go against it? What American center of power or influence had any strong interest in opposing that official narrative?

Certainly there was immediate and total skepticism overseas, with few foreign leaders ever believing the story, and figures such as Nikita Khrushchev, Charles DeGaulle, and Fidel Castro all immediately concluded that a political plot had been responsible for Kennedy's elimination. Mainstream media outlets in France and the rest of Western Europe were equally skeptical of the "lone gunman theory," and some of the most important early criticism of U.S. government claims was produced by Thomas Burnett, an expatriate American writing for one of the largest French newsweeklies. But in pre-Internet days, only the tiniest sliver of the American public had regular access to such foreign publications, and their impact upon domestic opinion would have been nil.

Perhaps instead of asking ourselves why the "lone gunman" story was accepted, we should instead be asking why it was ever vigorously challenged, during an era when media control was extremely centralized in establishmentarian hands.

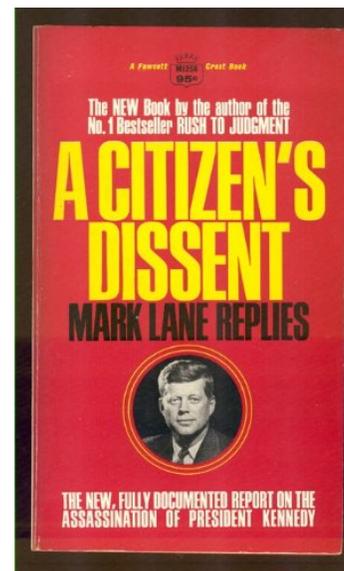
Oddly enough, the answer may lie in the determination of a single individual named Mark Lane, a left-liberal New York City attorney and Democratic Party activist. Although JFK assassination books eventually numbered in the thousands and the resulting conspiracy theories roiled American public life throughout the 1960s and 1970s, without his initial involvement matters might have followed a drastically different trajectory.

From the very first, Lane had been skeptical of the official story, and less than a month after the killing, *The National Guardian*, a small left-wing national newspaper, published his 10,000 word critique, highlighting major flaws in the "lone gunman theory." Although his piece had been rejected by every other national periodical, the public interest was enormous, and once the entire edition sold out, thousands of extra copies were printed in pamphlet form. Lane even rented a theater in New York City, and for several months gave public lectures to packed audiences.

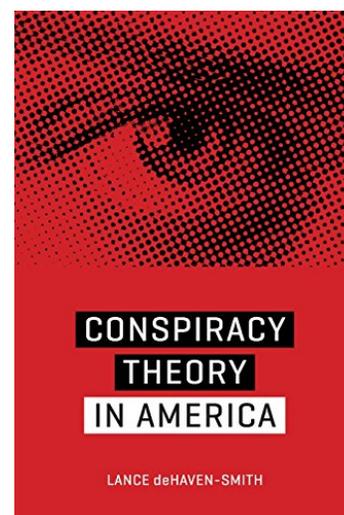
After the Warren Commission issued its completely contrary official verdict, he began working on a manuscript, and although he faced enormous obstacles in finding an American publisher, once *Rush to Judgment* appeared, it spent a remarkable two years on the national bestseller lists, easily reaching the #1 spot. Such tremendous economic success naturally persuaded a host of other authors to follow suit, and an entire genre was soon established. Lane later published *A Citizens Dissent* recounting his early struggles to break

the total American “media blackout” against anyone contradicting the official conclusion. Against all odds, he had succeeded in sparking a massive popular uprising sharply challenging the narrative of the establishment.

According to Talbot, “By late 1966, it was becoming impossible for the establishment media to stick with the official story” and the November 25, 1966 edition of *Life Magazine*, then at the absolute height of its national influence, carried the remarkable cover story “Did Oswald Act Alone?” with the conclusion that he probably did not. The next month, *The New York Times* announced it was forming a special task force to investigate the assassination. These elements were to merge with the media furor soon surrounding the Garrison investigation that began the following year, an investigation that enlisted Lane as an active participant. However, behind the scenes a powerful media counterattack was also being launched at this same time.



In 2013 Prof. Lance deHaven-Smith, past president of the Florida Political Science Association, published *Conspiracy Theory in America*, a fascinating exploration of the history of the concept and the likely origins of the term itself. He noted that during 1966 the CIA had become alarmed at the growing national skepticism of the Warren Commission findings, especially once the public began turning its suspicious eyes toward the intelligence agency itself. Therefore, in January 1967 top CIA officials distributed a memo to all their local stations, directing them to employ their media assets and elite contacts to refute such criticism by various arguments, notably including an emphasis on Robert Kennedy’s supposed endorsement of the “lone gunman” conclusion.



This memo, obtained by a later FOIA request, repeatedly used the term “conspiracy” in a highly negative sense, suggesting that “conspiracy theories” and “conspiracy theorists” be portrayed as irresponsible and irrational. And as I [wrote](#)[4] in 2016,

Soon afterward, there suddenly appeared statements in the media making those exact points, with some of the wording, arguments, and patterns of usage closely matching those CIA guidelines. The result was a huge spike in the pejorative use of the phrase, which spread throughout the American media, with the residual impact continuing right down to the present day.

This possible cause-and-effect relationship is supported by other evidence. Shortly after leaving *The Washington Post* in 1977, famed Watergate journalist Carl Bernstein published a 25,000 word *Rolling Stone* [cover story](#)[5] entitled “The CIA and the Media” revealing that during the previous quarter century over 400 American journalists had secretly carried out assignments

for the CIA according to documents on file at the headquarters of that organization. This influence project, known as “Operation Mockingbird,” had allegedly been launched near the end of the 1940s by high-ranking CIA official Frank Wisner, and included editors and publishers situated at the very top of the mainstream media hierarchy.

For whatever reason, by the time I came of age and began following the national media in the late 1970s, the JFK story had become very old news, and all the newspapers and magazines I read provided the very strong impression that the “conspiracy theories” surrounding the assassination were total nonsense, long since debunked, and only of interest to kooks on the ideological fringe. I was certainly aware of the enormous profusion of popular conspiracy books, but I never had the slightest interest in looking at any of them. America’s political establishment and its close media allies had outlasted the popular rebellion, and the name “Mark Lane” meant almost nothing to me, except vaguely as some sort of fringe-nut, who very occasionally rated a mention in my mainstream newspapers, receiving the sort of treatment accorded to Scientologists or UFO activists.

Oddly enough, Talbot’s treatment of Lane was also rather dismissive, recognizing his crucial early role in preventing the official narrative from quickly hardening into concrete, but also emphasizing his abrasive personality, and almost entirely ignoring his important later work on the issue, perhaps because so much of it had been conducted on the political fringe. Robert Kennedy and his close allies had similarly boycotted Lane’s work from the very first, regarding him as a meddlesome gadfly, but perhaps also ashamed that he was asking the questions and doing the work that they themselves were so unwilling to undertake at the time. Douglass’s 500 page book scarcely even mentions Lane.

Reading a couple of Lane’s books, I was quite impressed by the enormous role he had seemingly played in the JFK assassination story, but I also wondered how much of my impression may have been due to the exaggerations of a possible self-promoter. Then, on May 13, 2016 I opened my *New York Times* and found nearly a full page obituary[6] devoted to Lane’s death at age 89, the sort of treatment these days reserved for only the highest-ranking U.S. Senators or major rap stars. And the 1,500 words were absolutely glowing, portraying Lane as a solitary, heroic figure struggling for decades to reveal the truth of the JFK assassination conspiracy against an entire political and media establishment seeking to suppress it.

I read this as a deep apology by America’s national newspaper of record. *President John F. Kennedy was indeed killed by a conspiracy, and we are sorry we spent more than a half century suppressing that truth and ridiculing those who uncovered it.*

Related Reading:

- [American Pravda: How the CIA Invented “Conspiracy Theories”](#)[7]
- [American Pravda: Was General Patton Assassinated?](#)[8]
- [Our American Pravda](#)[9]

Source References

[1] JFK => <https://www.amazon.com/JFK-Kevin-Costner/dp/Boo2MFULQO/>

[2] “Our American Pravda” => <http://www.unz.com/runz/our-american-pravda/>

[3] he characterized Talbot as =>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/20/books/review/Brinkley-t.html>

[4] wrote => <http://www.unz.com/runz/american-pravda-how-the-cia-invented-conspiracy-theories/>

[5] cover story => http://www.carlbernstein.com/magazine_cia_and_media.php

[6] nearly a full page obituary => <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/13/us/mark-lane-who-asserted-that-kennedy-was-killed-in-conspiracy-dies-at-89.html>

[7] American Pravda: How the CIA Invented “Conspiracy Theories” =>

<http://www.unz.com/runz/american-pravda-how-the-cia-invented-conspiracy-theories/>

[8] American Pravda: Was General Patton Assassinated? =>

<http://www.unz.com/runz/was-general-patton-assassinated/>

[9] Our American Pravda => <http://www.unz.com/runz/our-american-pravda/>