

## **Killing Kennedy, Killing The Individualistic American**

**By Jackie Burns**

“Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members”  
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance*

The assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and the countless conspiracy theories left in the wake of the murder is one of the most highly disputed cases in American history. From a lone gunman to a shadow government, scores of people are indicted and all information is suspect. The sheer depth of explanations and the scope of the guilty parties rival that of any other conspiracy. The notoriety of this event in American culture is not of waning interest; even after more than forty years there is still speculation. New evidence is presented from scholarly journals to blogs on personal websites, not to mention the fact that the old theories have never quite died out. The very act of conspiring about Kennedy's assassination is a commonality in American culture, akin to the longevity of speculation as to whether it was really Mrs. O'Leary's cow that started the Chicago fire. Academic communities cannot ignore the breadth of the conspiracies that surround JFK, it is integral to investigate the nature of the accusations. Such exploration is necessary in order to understand the role that conspiracy theories play in the dialogue between historical events and the subsequent social impact that results. Without the investigation into the assassination of the thirty-fifth president, we as an academic community are willfully ignoring a widespread and pervasive phenomenon.

Having conducted research into the Kennedy craze, it has become apparent that there is more to the conspiracies than complex narratives complete with motives. There is a symptomatic nature encasing the stories, which belittles the importance of who actually

killed Kennedy. The water runs deep in the very pathology of these claims, and synthesis leads me to the conclusion that the speculation surrounding the assassination is based on the relationship between American citizens have and their government. Accumulating various explanations, the prevalence of indictments of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Mafia, and the Military Industrial Complex (MIC), begs for questions of deeper study as to how individuals perceive those who are elected and appointed to run our country. In all three instances, the links between the fear of abuse of power and distrust in the leadership create a chain that leads to their ultimate condemnation in the minds of (certain) citizens, which in turn manifests through conspiratorial texts. The very relationship between the citizens of the United States and organizations within our national boundaries leads to questions inquiring as to how individuals see their role in society, and calls for a discussion of the role of individualism in regards to national identity.

The concept of the individual is not new to the discussion surrounding the nature of society. The very foundations of the American government, and the roots of American culture are based on the founding father's emphasis on a constant questioning of our individual worth and the ability to direct our own lives. One merely has to look at the Federalist or Anti-federalist papers to see the dialogue that has spawned from this issue or the Bill of Rights to see that argument manifested into the guide to individual rights for citizens of the United States. But before looking at the nature of individuality in relation to groups, it is necessary to understand the nature of existing in the United States and the culture of the individual that has been established. According to research done by Yoshihisa Kashima et al., perceived entitativity, the extent to which a group/individual is

viewed as a real entity, is comprised of two concepts. The first is psychological essentialism; the belief in the presence of essence-like unchangeable qualities, and the second is agency, the extent to which something is a social entity. Based on samples from East Asia, Europe, and three English-speaking countries, Kashima et al. showed that “the individual seems to be perceived to be more entitative than groups.... With regard to perceived agency, the individual was most naturally attributed mental states such as thoughts, wants, and intentions in English-speaking countries...” (Kashima 162). The American experience has been riddled with the notions of rugged individualism and manifest destiny, and thus it is only to be expected that the individual is seen in American culture as the chief proprietor of one’s destiny. Kashima’s research highlights the fact that our culture sees a person as “more entitative,” more concrete an entity than a group structure. Our collective society tends to see individuals as the movers and shakers of society – the name Rockefeller is remembered more so than the organization he formed, Standard Oil. These precepts stress the connection between our own history and our collective perception of the individual and have not been lost in succeeding generations of Americans – they are still alive and well, constantly helping to shape attitudes relating to the position of the self.

Individualism has been branded and categorized under many different umbrellas, but the connection between them all, from utilitarian to expressive to American individualism, is apparent. Individualism highlights that, “relationships are individually based; that is, they are not obligatory and continue only as long as they are mutually pleasing or worthwhile...if a relationship is not equitable or personally satisfying it can be dissolved and a new relationship established with someone else” (Oyserman 1607).

The focus on choice and the atomic nature of man is core to individualism. Since the earliest days of the United States, the concept of individualism has been linked to our way of life. Harvard professor Harvey C. Mansfield explores the notion of individualism in America in his work, *Democratic Greatness in the American Founding*. Mansfield looks at Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and studies how the individual in America serves as the instrument of democracy. If we loosen our hold on the principles of individuality, we are threatening the fibers of democracy. As Tocqueville says, "No citizen is so obscure that it is not very dangerous to allow him to be oppressed" (Mansfield 12). Such an example demonstrates the pervasiveness of this ideology in America and its importance in shaping the mindset of the country.

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty said in his work *Phenomenology of Perception* in 1945, "we all have and we all are a body" (Van Wolputte 1). That simple observation of the presence of our bodily existence is not readily challenged. However, with the coming of the age of widening social networks, the line between the self and the group becomes blurred. Responsibilities once laid upon the individual are now found more and more within group structures. From a collectivist point of view, "one's relationships are set by one's group memberships and social roles, and these carry with them obligations that are not necessarily based on questions of equity" (Oyserman 1607). Industrialized societies today, America included, have many groups that members are involved with, whether subscription to the group is compulsory or voluntary. The groups that one can readily leave or join without excess burden are not those that this research is focused upon. Rather, it is important to expand upon the role of compulsory entities in society, such as governmental associations. Furthermore, it also serves to look at the nature of

organizations that influence life, in which membership is not a prerequisite for the possibility of control over aspects of one's actions. The nature of these dueling personalities of America creates an intrinsic friction in the social sphere of activity. We find ourselves with two competing ideologies, two seemingly polarized views of existence, and yet they are found successful in our social system. This friction serves as the fault line at which conspiracy theory can grow, simply because there is stress between two bedrock ideals of our culture. Conspiracy theories about JFK are able to thrive as a result of the individual trying to deal with the warring ideologies that are presented to him everyday, as inconspicuous as they may be to the public at large.

Organizations can encapsulate our day-to-day activity, seemingly regulating proceedings based on random and impersonal means. The expanding notion of a grander social contract between the citizens of this nation and organizations that outwardly codify our existence is a locus of interest in this debate. This additional emphasis on the collective rather than the self has created a strain between the traditional individualistic nature of American culture and the increasing collective nature of our activities. It is because of the paradoxical relationship between the individual and the larger social order that it is necessary to investigate the nature of conspiracy theories about the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

One might wonder why the CIA, MIC, and Mafia are chosen as objects of study. There are countless parties who are held accountable by various groups or persons in America in regards to the death of President Kennedy. However in each of these particular groupings of conspiracy theories a personal grievance is attributed to the motive. After the Bay of Pigs incident of 1961 the CIA was deeply embarrassed for the

operation and the death or capture of all of the anti-Castro Cubans involved, which was orchestrated by the intelligence agency. Professor Donald Wilkes of the University of Georgia School of Law, writing in a conspiratorial light, believes that many in the CIA thought, “[JFK] was to blame for the Bay of Pigs disaster and hated and despised Kennedy” (Wilkes 2). The enmity towards the president was not one of respectful disdain, but of deep-seated anger towards the president that unfurled itself through the assassination. The same is to be said for the Mob. In this model, the organized crime syndicate is connected all the way back to Kennedy’s father, Joe, and the amassing of his fortune through the selling of bootlegged whiskey. Furthermore, the Mafia is accused of swaying the 1960 election in Chicago that was a key battleground for the Kennedy administration. When Robert Kennedy was appointed Attorney General, he promptly created an Organized Crime Task Force at the Justice Department. This supposed “betrayal” by the Kennedy Administration against those who put them into power leads conspiracy theorists to believe that the Mafia was dealing with a defector in the only language that would communicate their dislike for the politics of JFK. Even the MIC, with its focus on increased military spending and engagement, took Kennedy’s decision to withdraw from Vietnam and the Cold War conflicts as a personal affront to the war machine.

By giving each of the above organizations the ability or at least perceived ability to act as an organic, calculating entity with a vendetta against JFK, the conspiracies are ascribing uniquely human characteristics to an otherwise inanimate system. Timothy Melley addresses this issue in *Empire of Conspiracy*, and denotes such a practice of personification as postmodern transference. He states,

“In moments of agency panic, individuals tend to attribute to these systems the qualities of motive, agency, and individuality they suspect have been depleted from themselves or others around them... agency panic...induces a postmodern transference in which social regulation seems to be the intentional product of a single conscious or monolithic ‘will’” (Melley 13).

The Mafia, CIA, and MIC are entities which exert influence on some sector of the population, whether it is sanctioned by the federal government or not. From that, a conscious viewpoint is established, through which citizens see these organizations as those that hold a level of control over the actions of individuals in this country. When that knowledge of perceived control, of postmodern transference, is paired with a sense that one’s own influence and power in society is declining, a perfect recipe for conspiracy results. Another recurring theme throughout the conspiracy texts is the light in which Kennedy is painted apropos to these organizations. The connotations attached to anyone accused of the assassination is undoubtedly negative. However, that should not necessitate that consequentially JFK is the inverse, a positive figure. The rumors surrounding the debauchery of the Kennedy Administration are not new to the ears of America – the tales of “the dark side of Camelot” have reached even the staunchest supports of our youngest president. And yet, JFK is portrayed in each of these texts as a figure of good, positioned against groups who were out to no good. The MIC is portrayed as a money hungry machine that cares more about economic gains than the threats of war to the fabric of society. In “A Letter to the American People (and Myself in Particular) On the Unspeakable,” author James W. Douglass purports that JFK was murdered by those in charge of the military operations of this country, who would have directly benefited from an increase in defense spending and all of the other aggregate supply increases that would occur due to military conflict. He writes, “JFK was murdered

because he was turning, in the root biblical sense of the word ‘turning’ .... John Kennedy was murdered because as president of the US he had begun to turn away from, to repent from, his own complicity with the worst of U.S. imperialism” (Douglass 3). Continuing with the iconic language of religion, Douglass states that the “priests of our national security state,” namely the MIC, “saw [JFK] as a heretic” (Douglass 4). The resulting image of the MIC is one of villainy. The language of repentance suggests that JFK was an inculpable and unjustly murdered individual who fell at the hands of a group that was seeking to seek earthly gains through destruction. By using religious language the conspiracy theory is casting Kennedy as the god-fearing entity whereas the MIC is the evil, therefore socially intolerable, entity. The religious rhetoric is a vehicle through which the writers of this particular conspiracy seek to make the conversation about JFK perceivably more black and white, as well as bring in an authority (God), to ensure that not only will many relate to the claims being made but feel a connection to them, hopefully drawing readers into the theory.

The religious nature of the above arguments evolves into a discussion and subsequently the establishment of a binary. The malevolent group matched against the “noble” individual is also found in conspiracies about Mafia involvement in the murder. The Mafia is an organization that operates outside the normal constraints of society. Stories of Mafia “whacks” and instances of calculated steps to achieve power through illicit activities such as drug trade and money laundering long precede the JFK assassination, and will continue to be prevalent in society. The blogger of “The JFK Assassination: Mafia Theory,” insists that, “The Mafia upset with the younger Kennedy’s constant pressure on the Mob, his constant FBI surveillance, and his constant publicity,

which now surrounded their once secret operations, was fed up” (Artlu 1). Once again, Kennedy is subtly regarded as a crusader brought down because of morally wicked groups. Kennedy, through his brother, was trying to crack down on an ill of society, known for corruption and illegal activity, and consequentially is murdered in a calculated manner, similar to any other Mafia hit. The Mafia is not an organization that garners much approval in the United States, or anywhere in the world for that matter. By selecting the Mafia as a primary target for the culprit of the assassination, a context is established, through which the “Mafia vs. JFK” scenario is constructed. In their essay “Deus Ex Mafia: The Solution to America’s Greatest Murder Mystery?” Lamar Waldron and Thom Hartman bring up the fact that JFK was actively seeking to destroy the Mafia’s influence in America and there “was a war on organized crime figures then being waged by the Department of Justice under the leadership of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy” (Waldron 2). By focusing on the illicit activity of the Mafia, an undoubtedly negative thing in most of America’s eyes, and by placing JFK as the entity which was seeking to destroy that sector of society that is perceived to be detrimental and subversive, we are left to believe as readers that there was a battle between good and evil that was carried out, and the bad guys won. The very act of creating this either/or situation makes it so that in terms of the JFK assassination we are presented with a picture of good people and bad groups and are subsequently expected to disavow said group, placing JFK and consequentially the individual in the right.

Even CIA conspiracies are presented as a struggle between the association and the individual. After the Bay of Pigs incident in 1961 and the botched American involvement, the Kennedy administration was targeted for its covert operations. Soon

after the event, JFK fired head of the CIA Allen Dulles and his chief deputy Charles Cabell for the failure on the part of the CIA. Kennedy also allegedly promised to “smash the CIA into a thousand pieces” (Hornberger 2). Donald Wilkes conspires that all of this led to a deep embittered government agency that had a personal vendetta against JFK. He writes,

“In the 1960s the CIA more resembled an untouchable crime syndicate than a legitimate government entity. Lavishly but secretly funded, unrestrained by public opinion, cloaked in secrecy, conducting whatever foreign or domestic clandestine operations it wished without regard to laws or morals, and specializing in deception, falsification, and mystification, the CIA was riddled at all levels with ruthless, cynical officials and employees who believed that they were above the law ...” (Wilkes 2).

Once again we find ourselves with a depiction of immoral activity surrounding the (suspected) perpetrators of the assassination, and the juxtaposition of their iniquities with a man who was trying to end their actions to benefit society as a whole.

Entangled in the conflict between good and evil forces that is unveiled in the conspiracies, there is another issue which we must concern ourselves with in the form of further investigation. There is an undeniable difference between the accused parties and the late president. Each of these organizations is a large hierarchical body that has concentrated power over a range of societal activities, pitted against a single person.

Blogger Artlu believes that the Mafia “had the motive, power, and the money in order to murder the president” and emphasizes the control that organized crime had, stating, “The Mafia had reasons to hate Kennedy, and it certainly had the power within its own organization to kill the president” (Artlu 1). The control and pressures that the Mafia can exercise far outweigh the power of any one person. The same goes for the MIC, which “carried out covert action campaigns to overthrow foreign governments and assassinate

their leaders whenever they were thought to be dangerous to the interest of the power elite in the United States” (Douglass 1). There is a sense that the authority and influence that each of us holds is minute compared to that of these institutions, and our lives can be dictated by their policies rather than our own decisions.

Timothy Melley investigates this issue in *Empire of Conspiracy*, noting that,

“In the postwar rhetoric of diminished individual agency, the power of social structures frequently comes as a shock.... This discovery in turn feeds the tendency to attribute motives to larger social and economic organizations, bureaucracies.... Such systems frequently seem to be autonomous agents in their own right, and worse, agents interested in the subordination of *all* humans” (Melley 6).

According to these conspiracy theories, the perceived lost of autonomy on the part of the individual is what is at stake, and in turn, control is given to unconcerned, uninvolved organizations depicted as being in direct opposition to the individualistic values that our nation was supposedly based on. John F. Kennedy is a relatable figure because he is one human agent, just like us, whereas groups such as the CIA, Mafia, or MIC are vague, if not abstract concepts that are not readily tangible for individuals. By victimizing the late president and vilifying these organizations, we are left with an attempt “to defend the self against the social order...It is to endorse an all-or-nothing conception of agency, a view in which agency is a property, parceled out either to individuals like oneself or to the “system” – a vague often construed to be massive, powerful, and malevolent” (Melley 10). By examining the JFK conspiracy theories through the lens of individualism vs. collectivism that Melley introduces in his work, we are given a better understanding of why so many alternative explanations involving large networks are implicated in the assassination. It is prudential, if not imperative, to recognize the impact of diminished human agency in the late twentieth century.

With all of the evidence provided in support of the primary arguments presented here, it is still necessary to address some of the confounding points that do not fit into the model described above. According to the Warren Commission Report, Lee Harvey Oswald is the official assassin of JFK. While the United States government released a document in 1964 saying that Oswald acted alone in a brash act, few believe that Oswald actually did it. So we must ask the question, why do Americans veer away from choosing Oswald as the culprit of the assassination? Such a notion would go along with the research presented by Kashima. Through studies of students from various countries, Kashima et. al found that American students consistently blamed individuals over groups for wrongdoings, while students from other cultures laid culpability upon groups rather than the individual (Kashima 151). A 1998 CBS News poll found that only 10 percent of respondents felt Oswald acted alone. Seventy-four percent believed there was a cover-up. So why is there a discrepancy between the culpability of Oswald and others targeted in this study? Despite what Kashima's work represents regarding the traits of Americans, it is integral to keep in mind that the explanation for this could be based on the fact that the focus on the individual only goes one way in JFK conspiracy theories. That is, the fact that an individual is so highly esteemed in this storyline makes it highly unattractive to blame another individual in a lone gunman scenario.

It is too easy for one to write off conspiracy theories, especially ones as elaborate and webbed as those surrounding JFK, linking causation to a few fringe individuals. Richard E. Sprague wrote a book entitled, *The Taking of America 1-2-3* in 1976 in which he argues that conspiracy theory is a disease, an illness that in worst form "produces the illusion that all of America's domestic assassinations were conspiracies" (Sprague 1).

Sprague appeals to the same logic as someone like historian Richard Hofstadter, attributing assassination conspiracy theory to “sick people.” This should not be the way our society tries to understand and synthesize these stories. Conspiracy theory is much bigger than a few individuals; even the most rational person, this researcher herself included, has put thought and perhaps even conscious weight behind JFK plots. Sprague, like Hofstadter, chooses to link conspiracy theory to a psychological variant, a weakness, which makes certain people more susceptible to conspiratorial thinking. But we must realize that such a diagnosis is faulty at best – a bandaid to a situation much more complex. There is something inherent about the JFK assassination that makes it conducive to conspiracy theory. It is the fact that the fear of the loss of individuality, individuality that was promised to us at the birth of our nation, could be stripped away so easily, especially from such an iconic figure as JFK.

It is true that if, for example, the Zapruder film caught the assassin of JFK on tape, the discussion about the president’s death would be more limited in the realm of conspiracy theory. This is not to say that all theories would cease to be ostensible, but rather the scope would be reduced. As JFK specialist Mel Ayton said, “there is a rational answer to such purported mysteries and it lies in the nature of the human mind which needs to bring order out of chaos; to seek truth where there is no truth” (Ayton 1). From that, conspiracy theory is a vehicle to combine those questions with the subconscious fear of loss of individualism at the expense of gaining a collective national identity and social structure. Through these analyses it is clear that the assassination of Kennedy has created an environment in America where suspicion and skepticism flow freely. As discussed previously, the nature of the conspiracy theories surrounding JFK and larger

organizations lends itself to exploring. Without paying heed to the nature of JFK conspiracies, we lose the chance to understand how the individual feels in relation to the structures and systems that surround and dictate everyday life.

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