



# OPINION: SORRY, CONSPIRACY THEORISTS - - LEE HARVEY OSWALD ACTED ALONE - DAVID HARSANYI

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This week, the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration released tens of thousands of documents related to the assassinations of former President John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert, and Martin Luther King Jr.

Now, I'm one of those naive Americans who believe Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in 1963 when he assassinated Kennedy in Dallas. If the Warren Commission had found a smoking gun, we would have heard about it in 1964. The notion that hundreds of staffers, politicians and conspirers could keep such a secret is ridiculous.

Still, conspiracies surrounding Kennedy's assassination are by far the most popular in the country. Thousands of books have been written on the topic, and millions of theories spawned.

A 2023 YouGov poll found that 54% of the public believed it was "definitely or probably" true that Oswald "did not act alone in assassinating John F. Kennedy in 1963." Another 24% were unsure. This means only 23% of my fellow citizens accept the fact that a bitter loser and communist with violent tendencies grabbed a rifle and shot Kennedy on his own.

Don't get me wrong, the release of documents regarding the assassination was long overdue. Overclassification only engenders public suspicion. Reading about the unfolding investigation, the panic and discussions, and the reaction of agencies and foreign governments offers us invaluable historical perspectives. There are lots of fascinating tidbits in those files.

However, it's also obvious why officials wouldn't want them to be released. The Kennedy files contain instances of phone tapping and spying within friendly nations. They offer details on intelligence-gathering methods that may still be used. Mostly, though, it's a massive cache of documents composed of scraps of evidence, theories and random unsourced allegations that are sure to be misread and misrepresented by conspiracists.

Indeed, many social media "influencers" immediately figured out who did it (spoiler: the Jews). But even the casually conspiratorial right-wing influencer showed how easy it is to jump to conclusions when you don't have historical context.

One file shared widely on social media, for instance, contained a copy of a Ramparts article from 1967 that casts suspicion on the death of a man named Gary Underhill, a CIA functionary who committed suicide soon after the assassination.

None of the big influencer accounts spreading this document seemed to be aware that Ramparts was a radical left-wing, pro-Soviet publication in the 1960s and 1970s that blamed literally every modern atrocity on the CIA. Someone just threw it into a file.

It should be noted that most of these documents had apparently been made public with a few redactions. The Underhill suicide has long been in the public record, lumped in with other supposedly untimely deaths connected to the Kennedy assassination.

Many Americans seem better versed in the paranoid mythology that's arisen around the Kennedy assassination than any genuine history. Oliver Stone's 1991 film "JFK," which pinned the assassination on the "military-industrial complex," the CIA, the FBI, former President Lyndon B. Johnson, the mafia, anti-Castro Cubans and big business, among others, wasn't a documentary.

And that's the thing: you can never debate conspiracists.

Conspiracy theories are organisms forever undergoing mitosis, morphing into new "questions" and conjectures. In that sense, it doesn't really matter what the Kennedy documents say. If none of them corroborate the conspiracist's priors, they will simply contend that pertinent documents were removed by the CIA or the Freemasons. Conspiracists feel no obligation to prove anything. They act like it's your job to debunk their never-ending, unfalsifiable fantasies.

For some, a healthy skepticism of government has mutated into a psychological need to blame everything on the government. Sometimes, it seems that every historical incident is now framed in the context of contemporary political antagonisms. Intelligence services went after President Donald Trump, so they must be behind every despicable act ever perpetrated.

It's only going to get worse.

Clickbait social media accounts with millions of followers chum the waters with misleading snippets of documents and harebrained theories. And because so many of our institutions, including intelligence agencies, have lost our trust, millions will be seduced into conspiratorial thinking.

The media, once tasked with tempering the public's paranoia, has also lost all credibility. As it happens, they are often participants in spreading conspiracies, most notably with the Russia collusion hoax, perhaps the most politically consequential one in American history.

Now, if tomorrow a batch of documents appeared that indisputably showed Allen Dulles, John McCone, Johnson, Joe Colombo or whoever else was conspiring to assassinate the president, I would accept the truth. But conspiracy theorists are never swayed by the preponderance of evidence or the complete lack of it. They are not looking for truth; they are looking for more questions.

And no document dump is ever going to change that.