
A thesis submitted for the Rutgers University History Department Honors Program on April 20, 2012

By Kathleen Monsky

Advised by Norman Markowitz
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements……………………………………………………………………………2

Introduction……………………………………………………………………………………3

Chapter I: The Media Storms Dallas…………………………………………………………5

Chapter II: The Media’s Coverage of Jim Garrison’s Investigation………………….14

Chapter III: The Media Breaks the Watergate Scandal Causing JFK Assassination-gate……21

Chapter IV: A Return to the Media Hype Twenty-five Years Later…………………..27

Conclusion……………………………………………………………………………………36

Bibliography…………………………………………………………………………………..38
Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support and wealth of knowledge that my advisor Professor Markowitz provided me throughout the year. I would also like to thank my parents for introducing me to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, as a child. It is my parents who have always been supportive of my interest in the subject. Finally, I am grateful for my friends for constantly encouraging me in the process of writing my thesis.
Introduction

President John F. Kennedy was assassinated almost fifty years ago on November 22, 1963. Still, all these years later, Kennedy has remained a popular topic in the minds of the American public. A captivating and handsome man, President Kennedy had been a major focus of the media during his presidency. The media found a great subject in Kennedy, dotting on his young family as well as the many televised press conferences that the president held. So it is no surprise that when President Kennedy was assassinated the media was eager to cover the historic event. What was not expected, though, was the fact that such high levels of media coverage of Kennedy and his assassination would continue on to this day. It has been this continuing media coverage that has kept JFK as a figure in modern popular culture.

It is apparent that the media has played a major role in the way that the American public has come to remember President Kennedy’s assassination. What is not so clear, though, is the points in time in which the media created this effect. More so, at what points in history did the media shape how we think about JFK’s assassination and in what ways did it do so? From this we can realize that history can be shaped by the media, and how powerful the media really can be in that sense. More importantly it is important to identify what other events have shaped our view on history, whether it is JFK’s assassination or any event of the past. For, is with such knowledge that an event can be truly understood.

In order to answer these questions the examination of the media coverage of John F. Kennedy’s assassination was necessary. In analyzing the media, in the forms of television, radio, newspaper and film, from 1963 on, four points in history stick out as the rallying events in which
the media has shaped the public’s view on the assassination. The first point can be identified as the days following Kennedy’s assassination, in which the media created the public’s original ideas on the assassination. The second point came in 1967 with Attorney General Jim Garrison’s investigation of the assassination, in which the media pushed Americans to further consider conspiracy theories about the assassination. The third point grew out of the Watergate scandal, in which the American government was pressured by the media to reopen the investigation on Kennedy’s assassination. The final major point was the twenty-fifth anniversary of Kennedy’s assassination, in 1988, in which the media renewed thoughts of Kennedy for the American public. It is within each of these events that the media was able to have an effect on the memory of JFK’s assassination, thus continuing to reassert the public’s interest in the assassination.
Chapter I: The Media Storms Dallas

When President John F. Kennedy was shot and killed on November 22, 1963 the whole world stood still. That is besides the media world. Within moments of the tragic event’s occurrence, the media began to dedicate itself to the developing story. It was the continuous coverage of the assassination by the media that shaped the memory of JFK’s assassination forever.

The media coverage of President Kennedy’s trip to Dallas began before he had even arrived. Several days leading up to Kennedy’s visit, Dallas newspapers published the motorcade route that the president would take through downtown Dallas, including the Dallas Times Herald on November 19, 1963.¹ That route was followed, thus giving an assassin the knowledge of where to aim for the president.² Thus the coverage of the media before the assassination had even occurred played a role in the impending assassination of John F. Kennedy.

During his motorcade through Dallas, at 12:30 pm CST, President John F. Kennedy was shot. Within minutes, while the President was rushed to the hospital, news broke over the radio. The news first was first heard six minutes after the president had been shot, on ABC Radio as a special bulletin that simply reported that three shots had been fired at the president’s motorcade.³ Soon after, the first television bulletin broke on CBS, interrupting the regular programming of As

---

the World Turns some ten minutes after the assassination, at 12:40 pm. At this point, CBS was using audio only to report the assassination as no cameras were yet available. This report added that Kennedy may be seriously injured. It took about twenty minutes, but eventually CBS, as well as the other television networks (NBC and ABC) began to broadcast live with their anchorman at 1 pm CST. In the case of CBS, the broadcast was famously carried out by Walter Cronkite.  

Once television coverage of Kennedy’s assassination did begin, it would continue on for a record length of time. Each of the networks held continuous coverage on November 22, 1963 once the news broke of Kennedy being shot. Anchormen manned the screen giving updates as they slowly came in. These news broadcasts remained hopeful that President Kennedy would live, repeating that there was no official word that he was dead, even as the reports started to become grimmer. At 1 PM the President was declared dead, but it was not officially reported by any network for at least a half hour. Memorably was the report of Kennedy’s death by Cronkite who shed a tear upon delivering the news. This coverage of Kennedy’s assassination was just the beginning, as television coverage would go on for four days, for more than seventy consecutive hours without commercial interruption- a record that would hold up until the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2011.

Turning off regular programming and commercials over the course of four days, the media began a trend in extensive coverage of Kennedy’s assassination. Live television

---


5 (CBS, 22 Nov. 1963)

broadcasts were a recent innovation in 1963. Thus, an event as astounding as the president’s assassination presented an amazing way for television to be utilized by the media. This event could be their test for future major, timely events. Perhaps the media was not ready for the challenge of television coverage of JFK’s assassination.

Once it was official that Kennedy was indeed dead and that Lyndon Johnson was now the President of the United States of America, the media began to mourn the president’s death. Reports of statements of sorrow and regret were given from leaders around the world including Charles De Gaulle. Reporters were shown asking the general public how they felt about Kennedy’s death and all were shocked and distraught. Yet, as a CBS anchorman stated there was not much new news to cover on the assassination. There were a lot of speculative statements and not much could be confirmed or developed for some time. But, the networks had already decided within a few hours to have continuous coverage until the funeral of President Kennedy.\(^7\)

Little information was available on who had committed the crime. Dallas police were looking for a suspect. Yet, few facts reached the media, but that policeman J. D. Tippit had been killed in a possible connection to a suspect of Kennedy’s assassination. Eventually, Lee Harvey Oswald was taken into custody, charged first with Tippit’s murder and a few hours later with President Kennedy’s assassination. With the arrest of Oswald, the media had something substantial and new to cover in its continuous coverage. Thus, with the opportunity to cover something major, the media flocked to the Dallas jail in which Oswald was being held. The chaos that this media storm created would actually lead to another important event in the series of events surrounding the Kennedy assassination.

\(^7\) (CBS, 22 Nov. 1963).
Hundreds of news reporters had flocked to Dallas upon the news of Kennedy’s assassination. Trying to get the best story it was only logical that many of these media men occupied the jail in hopes of seeing Oswald and hearing new statements on him. This unusual amount of media caused frenzy within the police headquarters. The media had no precedent on how to conduct itself in such a circumstance, and the situation quickly grew out of control. The media failed to listen to police regulations, such as not asking Oswald questions, which the media did as they shouted at him asking if he had killed President Kennedy, to which Oswald responded to in confusion and denial. It got to the point that the police could not control the media, let alone differentiate if those entering the police station were legitimate news personnel.

The media was in full force at the Dallas police station when Oswald was being transported to the county jail on the morning of November 24, 1963. This mass crowd of media made it possible for Jack Ruby to slip into the police headquarters although he was not authorized to do so. As television cameras broadcasted live, Ruby pulled out a gun and shot Oswald. This event created a major new development in the assassination for the media, an event that the media had a major role in causing.

When the Kennedy assassination was investigated by the Warren Commission, the Warren Report further confirmed that the murder of Oswald was the fault of the media. According to the Warren Report over eight hundred newsmen had flooded Dallas on November 22, 1963. Based on video, about one hundred of those reporters flocked to the Dallas police headquarters where Oswald was being held. This created a scene that one FBI agent reported
was like that of “Grand Central Station at rush hour” or “Yankee Stadium during the World Series.” Police Chief Curry described the scene as “pandemonium.”

Police made attempts to work with the press, but the press failed to cooperate. The police would allow the press to remain in the headquarters if they stayed under control and did not ask questions of Oswald. Yet, against an injunction by Chief Curry prohibiting questioning of Oswald, the press shouted questions at Oswald.

The press was constantly questioning the police as well. The press demanded a constant flow of new information from police and thus would push them for interviews while at the police headquarters. Why did the police give into these demands? The press had suggested that the police were guilty of brutalizing Oswald. While there was no proof of this, in order to disprove these rumors the police gave the press a lot of information and access to the police headquarters. Some of this information that was later found to be incorrect. Pressured by the media to give them updated information, the police gave unreliable and unconfirmed information to the media in order to satisfy them. The media reported this unreliable information to the public; therefore such misinformation was in part responsible for later myths that would come to exist about the assassination. As the Warren Report stated, “The erroneous disclosures became the basis for distorted reconstructions and interpretations of the assassination.” Clearly, the media’s pressure for information negatively affected how people viewed the assassination, distorting reality with false beliefs about it.

---

On November 24, 1963 the press intrusions climaxed when Jack Ruby was able to shoot and kill Oswald, because of the media’s presence. The media had been instructed by the police that they would have to stand against the Main Street ramp and remain behind an imaginary line while Oswald was being moved from the police headquarters to jail. There were about forty newsmen present and about seventy to seventy five police officers, thus the area was extremely overcrowded. It became difficult for some of the newsmen to see Oswald and thus when someone shouted, “Here he comes!” in reference to Oswald, the media-men began moving closer toward Oswald. Within this crowd, Ruby, unauthorized to do so, was able to enter from the Main Street ramp with a pistol in hand, without being noticed. Right in front of the media and policemen, Ruby held out his gun and shot Oswald. This shot proved to be fatal. Thus, the only suspect for the assassination of President Kennedy could never be put on trial and it would never truly be known if he had committed the crime. Without Oswald alive there could be no concrete answers to what had happened November 23, 1963.

The lack of a trial for the assassination would allow for cultural trauma to develop and continue to exist. When such a traumatic experience, in this case an assassination, occurs, people search for answers to reassert legitimacy. For the assassination of JFK, the cultural trauma was not able to be put to rest, as a public trial is necessary to restore order to society.\(^{11}\) Therefore, in its role in allowing Oswald to be killed, the media in effect allowed for cultural trauma from the assassination to remain a part of American society.

Had Oswald had lived; the high levels of media attention would have comprised the trial. While Oswald was still alive, District Attorney Wade received calls from lawyers that were concerned that the high amounts of information being released by the media to the public would make it difficult to hold a trial for Oswald. It would be almost impossible to find a jury that had no knowledge of the case. This was another effect that the media left upon the assassination, as there would never be a fair way to prove Oswald’s guilt or innocence.  

The Warren Commission was created by President Johnson on November 29, 1963. The Commission was meant to investigate the assassination of President Kennedy. When the Commission’s report, the Warren Report, was published in September of 1964, it included claims that the media held some responsibility for the problems that followed Kennedy’s assassination. The fact that a high level government investigation found the media guilty of creating a chaotic situation gives strong proof that this was indeed the case. For, after viewing video tapes of coverage and conducting interviews, the Warren Commission came to the conclusion that the media should be blamed for and held accountable for many misconceptions that the public has on the assassination.  

In its report, the Warren Commission suggested that the media needed to create reforms. In order to prevent behavior that the media displayed during the days after the Kennedy assassination, the Commission advised that the media review its code of ethics. It is evident that the media could not deny that it had acted poorly and held some responsibility for problems that occurred after the assassination, as the media began to examine itself and what it needed to reform. In fact, even before the Warren Report had been issued, in April 1964 the American

---

Society of Newspapers Editors (ASNE) discussed the role the media played in Dallas following the Kennedy assassination. From the ASNE meeting, the editors realized that the media needed to become more self-disciplined and create a higher standard for its actions in covering future events. This cast a shadow over previous pride in coverage of the assassination.\textsuperscript{14} Not wanting to be censored, though, the media looked to reforming itself. Different media groups began to meet on how this could be done, as they believed that if they followed the wishes of the Warren Commission their job would be made impossible by censorship. Thus out of Kennedy’s assassination, the media began to reform its coverage and ethics.

Such an issue of appropriate coverage would continue for some time after the Kennedy assassination. It became a major legal issue if the right to a fair trial or freedom of the press was more important and how the two could coexist. This issue came to its climax when it was brought to the Supreme Court in the Sheppard v. Maxwell case in 1965. Samuel Sheppard was found guilty of murdering his wife, but he claimed that he had not been protected from widespread publicity of his trial. Thus, Sheppard said that he had an unfair trial. The Supreme Court, in a decision of 8-1, essentially decided that a fair trial was more important that freedom of the press when it stated that Sheppard’s right to a fair trial was obstructed by the media’s coverage of his confessions and trial.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, with this decision, the media really did need to reform itself to remain viable.


\textsuperscript{15}Sheppard v Maxwell, 384 U.S. 333 (1966)
Returning to the coverage of the “four days” surrounding Kennedy’s assassination, the media continued to continuously cover the assassination until Kennedy’s funeral. Kennedy’s national funeral was broadcast live on television for the nation to see. Seeing the images on television of the casket holding the president’s body, Jackie Kennedy all dressed in black and the president’s toddler son saluting his father goodbye evoked strong feelings of sadness and loss. These images confirmed the assassination of President Kennedy was real and that Kennedy was no longer the nation’s leader. Even if the public was not in Washington, D.C. for the funeral, watching it on television allowed the public to mourn for its president. This first presidential funeral broadcast on television evoked stronger emotions for the American public. The funeral images will remain forever in the minds of any American that watched the funeral. Thus, with strong media coverage, the funeral of JFK is amongst the top events that America has come to associate with Kennedy and his assassination.

While Kennedy was laid to rest then in November of 1963, the coverage of his assassination would not be. Although the media had made promises to reform itself it seemed that once the media had affected the image of the assassination for the public, it would just continue in doing so. The live media coverage of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination may have centered on November 22-25, 1963. Yet, the action that the media took those few days would shape the memory of the assassination; a memory that exists to this day. But, as will be shown in the following chapters, the media continued to shape the memory of John F. Kennedy’s assassination through its coverage of events following the assassination.
Chapter II: The Media’s Coverage of Jim Garrison’s Investigation

In the years following President John F. Kennedy’s assassination talk of conspiracy began to appear within the media. The Warren Commission’s found that Lee Harvey Oswald had acted alone in the assassination of President Kennedy, but many theories arose casting doubt on this finding. In the midst of the Vietnam War, it was becoming more believable to Americans that the government was not telling the whole truth in the assassination investigation. Those like Mark Lane in his non-fiction book and film Rush to Judgment as well as the magazine Ramparts detailed the errors of the Warren Commission’s report. This climate of suspicion created an opportunity for New Orleans District Attorney General Jim Garrison to gain extensive media coverage on his investigation of the assassination.

While the Warren Commission had officially solved the questions surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1964, New Orleans’ District Attorney Jim Garrison was not satisfied with its findings. Believing that the assassination’s occurrence lay deeper than just Lee Harvey Oswald; Garrison decided to begin his own investigation of the assassination in early 1967. His investigation eventually led to a trial: the only public trial of JFK’s assassination to ever occur. This ability to continue, though, relied on the media’s coverage of the investigation.

At first Jim Garrison’s investigation of the Kennedy assassination received little to no media coverage. The investigation lacked leads and information, thus it was often neglected by the media and pushed to the wayside. Since the details of Garrison’s investigation were essentially kept a secret, it seemed that the media was going to leave this story alone.
Then, on February 17, 1967, the story broke that Jim Garrison was investigating the assassination of President Kennedy. While the investigation details had previously been hidden they became public that February when three reporters for the New Orleans’s newspaper, the New Orleans States-Item, researched the investigation.\(^\text{16}\) Since the financial records of the District Attorney’s office in New Orleans were available as public record, reporters Rosemary James, Jack Dempsey and David Snyder looked into those records and were able to see what Garrison’s investigation was truly about.\(^\text{17}\)

When asked about his investigation by Rosemary James, Garrison would not confirm nor deny its occurrence. Yet, when the story broke on February 17, Garrison became angry with the media. Garrison said that by its release to the public, the media was interfering with his investigation.\(^\text{18}\)

It was not just the States Item that would report on the Garrison investigation. When the paper’s story broke, hundreds of reporters flocked to New Orleans, just as they had done in Dallas, in order to cover the investigation. Excitement grew for the media that they would be able to cover, and more so uncover, details of the assassination of JFK once again.

Just a few days later, though, the main suspect of Garrison’s investigations died. David Ferrie had been taken into custody with a possible connection to the assassination. Ferrie was released and then found dead of natural causes on February 22, 1967. So, it seemed that there


\(^{18}\) Epstein, "Counterplot," 198.
would no longer be a story in New Orleans, as with the center person of the investigation dead, the media had little to nothing to report on.\textsuperscript{19}

While it seemed that the investigation would not lead anywhere at that point, the media continued to report on it. Rather than dismiss Garrison’s investigation as meaningless, though, the media continued to give Garrison the spotlight. Therefore the media allowed a story go on where no story existed.

\textit{Life} magazine’s reporter Richard Billings was even following Garrison. Realizing that \textit{Life} was looking into Garrison’s investigation, Garrison told the magazine that it should work with him in an effort to solve the case.\textsuperscript{20} The fact that the media was willing to work side by side with Garrison sent a strong message that Garrison’s investigation was legitimate.

Ultimately, Garrison grew tired of waiting on the cover story from \textit{Life} that he had expected. \textit{Life} actually never published the story on Garrison’s investigation, realizing that it was all just a publicity stunt. But, with so much media attention, Garrison was able to find a different media source to work with. This came in the form of the \textit{Saturday Evening Post}.

The \textit{Saturday Evening Post} published its story on May 6, 1967. Yet, the \textit{Saturday Evening Post} article “Rush to Judgment in New Orleans”, written by James Phelan, was actually a criticism of the investigation. Garrison had interviewed with Phelan in hopes of getting his story of the investigation out.\textsuperscript{21} In reality, though, the article mocked Garrison and showed the flaws in his investigation. Phelan explained that New Orleans’s was “staging its own version of the Warren Commission, without the Warren Commission.” Instead Garrison’s investigation, as

\textsuperscript{19} Epstein, “Counterplot,” 200.
\textsuperscript{20} Epstein, “Counterplot,” 280.
\textsuperscript{21} Epstein, “Counterplot,” 280.
Phelan describes, was a “one-man Warren Commission” with “an assortment of characters.” Such characters, as the article details, included one of the witnesses Perry Russo who was shown to have given inconsistent testimony. The article also cites Garrison’s open-ended and misleading statements that the investigation knew key details, but was unable to share or explain the proof.\(^\text{22}\)

The *Saturday Evening Post* served as one of the first major criticisms of Garrison’s investigation.\(^\text{23}\) This criticism, which proved Garrison’s investigation was illegitimate, should have put a stop to media coverage. Instead it opened up a new door for other media sources to also examine the investigation and point out the flaws within it.

Further critical exposure of Garrison’s investigation was shown on television. NBC aired a special on June 19, 1967 entitled “The JFK Conspiracy: The Case of Jim Garrison”. In the NBC special, several of Garrison’s witnesses were interviewed by NBC. These witnesses all explained how Garrison had bribed each of them with things like money and early release from jail time. Essentially all of Garrison’s key witnesses for his investigation were discounted. For, each person recanted their story and regretted having corroborated with Garrison.\(^\text{24}\) It was even revealed that the source on Clay Bertrand knew that Clay Shaw was not the same person as Bertrand. Thus, Garrison’s investigation was based on lies. Still, the NBC special does not


\(^{24}\) “The JFK Conspiracy: The Case of Jim Garrison,” June, 19 1967 (NBC), *Youtube*, March 14, 2010, December 10, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTDB5pTVvCY. Clay Bertrand was mentioned in the Warren Report having supposedly made a phone call asking for an attorney to represent Kennedy’s assassin. Garrison claimed that Clay Shaw had used Clay Bertrand as an alias and that Shaw was involved in a conspiracy, with David Ferrie, to kill the President Kennedy.
outright say that Garrison’s investigation was a sham, thus leaving room for the topic to remain in public discussion.\(^{25}\)

Instead of dismissing Garrison after its special, NBC allowed Garrison to continue to hold media attention. Claiming that the media was against him as a part of the assassination plot, and therefore misrepresented his investigation, NBC gave Jim Garrison a thirty minute spot to respond to the accusations made against him. Rather than removing Garrison from the public eye, this move by NBC furthered public awareness about his investigation into the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Some twenty million viewers watched Garrison’s response on July 15, 1967.\(^{26}\) This move by NBC demonstrated that it did not matter how illegitimate an investigation Garrison was running, the media was still going to follow it and thus keep the question of John F. Kennedy’s assassination alive.

While the media often did question Garrison and his investigations, ultimately the media allowed for Garrison to remain relevant. Even bad press coverage allowed Garrison to stay in the spotlight and thus continue on with his investigation. Often, Garrison’s presence in the media even allowed him to present himself as the righteous one with the media being in the wrong. The media’s allowing Garrison to retaliate to any of the accusations that were made about him and his investigation, allowed his faulty investigation to continue.

Even with criticism in the media toward Garrison, his investigation continued to make national headlines. Stories that resulted due to Garrison’s investigation include his subpoenaing of the Director of the C.I.A., Richard Helms, to question him on the C.I.A.’s investigation of the Kennedy assassination. A *The New York Times* article title read, “Garrison Subpoenas Helms to


\(^{26}\) Epstein, "Counterplot," 245.
Testify on the C.I.A. Investigation of Oswald.” This particular occurrence was due to Garrison’s belief that Oswald secretly had worked for the C.I.A. 27

The subpoena of Helm’s was amongst the many stories that surfaced from the investigation. Garrison charged and arrested many people, often his own witnesses, with crimes unrelated to the assassination.28 Garrison knew these arrests would keep media interested, as Garrison’s former staff member, William Gurvich, stated that Garrison knew that headlines were read and written on arrests and not on denials.29 Garrison knew that taking such actions would continue to draw media attention toward him.

When it seemed as if the media attention of Garrison was faltering, Playboy magazine changed that. In its October 1967 issue, Playboy featured an extensive interview with Jim Garrison.30 In the article, Garrison was able to defend himself and his beliefs on the assassination. Playboy was eager to get the story to press before the trial of Clay Shaw and therefore rushed the article without checking all the facts.31 This allowed Garrison to present information that was inaccurate. Thus, Playboy served as a way for Garrison to stay relevant and continue to generate public questioning of the Kennedy assassination.

It was not until two years after the investigation broke, that the media finally stopped covering Garrison. This came with the trial and acquittal of Clay Shaw in March of 1969. Once the Shaw case was over, there was nothing new to report. Garrison said he would go on with the

29 Epstein, "Counterplot," 223.
investigation for thirty years if it took him that long, but there were no new leads, so the media was finally forced to dismiss the subject.  

Garrison himself knew that in order to have his investigation continue, he had to maintain media coverage. With the media’s inability to step away from its obsession with the Kennedy assassination, the media ultimately fell into Garrison’s trap of continuing to cover him and keep him in the headlines. And with this failure of the media to step away from Garrison’s antics, Garrison was able to affect Americans’ beliefs about the assassination. Feeding into worries of a possible conspiracy, Garrison’s accusations of a conspiracy confirmed those Americans’ ideas of the assassination. So much so that a May 1967 poll revealed that sixty-six percent of Americans believed President Kennedy was killed as an act of a conspiracy.  

The media allowed Garrison to continue on so much so that his work made a major reprise in 1991. While the media did tune out Jim Garrison after the failure of the Clay Shaw trial in March 1969, Garrison’s book about his investigation, On the Trails of the Assassins led to his return to the public eye. For, Garrison’s book was utilized by Oliver Stone as a part of the popular film JFK. Garrison continued to influence American beliefs about the assassination.

---

33 Norden, Eric, "Jim Garrison."
Chapter III: The Media Breaks the Watergate Scandal Causing JFK Assassination-gate

In June 1972, the Watergate break-in led to a national scandal. Burglars broke into the Democratic National Committee’s headquarters and it would eventually come to light that several high up government officials were connected to the break-in and cover-up. This break by the media that resulted in the resignation of President Richard Nixon had an impact beyond the Watergate scandal itself. The lack of trust that was generated in the scandal would actually generate new interest in Nixon’s political rival, John F. Kennedy and his assassination.

In the wake of the Watergate break-in, the media began to investigate deeper into the story. With a secret inside man, Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein were able to uncover the break-in and subsequent attempt to cover it up. The story broke on June 18, 1972 as “Five Held in Plot to Bug Democratic Office Here”. The next day brought the article “GOP Security Aide Among Those Arrested.” Then on August 1, the headline read “Bug Suspect Got Campaign Funds.” This began the lead up to the eventual discovery that some of President Nixon’s staff had been involved in what became known as the Watergate Scandal.

This was shown in the Washington Post’s May 1, 1973 article “3 Top Nixon Aides, Kleindienst Out; President Accepts Full Responsibility; Richardson Will Conduct New Probe.”

Pressure from such stories coming out of the media began to shift focus to President Nixon and the inquiry of whether or not he was involved in the scandal. Thus, the president was pushed to release documents and tapes, but he refused to do so. He continued to claim innocence.
as one article best describes in its title, “Nixon Tells Editors, ‘I’m Not a Crook.” 34 Eventually Nixon was forced to hand over subpoenaed tapes to the investigation when the Supreme Court ruled against Nixon’s right to executive privilege. On July 25 it was reported that Nixon said he would fully comply with the Supreme Court’s ruling to hand over the tapes. Within a matter of days this lead to the House Judiciary Committee passing articles of impeachment for Nixon. As the Post explained the following day, all the pressure put on Nixon stemming from the media, had eventually forced Nixon to resign on August 8, 1974. Still, Nixon would not admit that he had committed a crime, despite the media’s claims that Nixon was involved in some way in the Watergate Scandal. 35 Once again media ability to influence American life was evident.

The Watergate scandal revived interest in President Kennedy’s assassination. Watergate created a feeling of distrust and uncertainty concerning the American government. If the president of the United States of America, as well as many other public officials, could have had a part in a crime and scandal like Watergate, what else was the government hiding? Should everything the government says and does really be trusted?

Since the Warren Commission’s report on Kennedy’s assassination had sparked disagreement and controversy, questions regarding the honesty of the government hit home on this issue. The media had been quite vocal about the errors and failures of the Warren Commission, having reported on as well as created many books and films about the subject. Thus, the possibility of government dishonesty that the Watergate scandal created, served as a great opportunity to question the Warren Report as truthful and valid.

With public distrust of government rising, the government decided to hold a new investigation on the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Thus, the United States House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) was created in September of 1976. The HCSA held the responsibility of investigating the “circumstances surrounding” the assassinations of both John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr.36 The media was demanding better answers from the government, thus it seemed necessary for the government to take another look at Kennedy’s assassination and see if any new information or findings could be made.

With new technology and more time to complete the investigation, the HSCA hoped to answer the unresolved question of JFK’s assassination. The committee looked into autopsy results, ballistics, photographic evidence and firearms testing. The most influential feature of the investigation was the acoustics analysis. Up until December 13, 1978, the HSCA had firmly supported the Warren Report findings that Oswald had fired all of the shots at Kennedy. The HSCA reported that “There was insufficient evidence to find that there was a conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy.” But, later in the evening of December 13, results came in for the acoustic analysis of a Dictaphone belt recording at the Dallas police headquarters on the day of Kennedy’s assassination. Three acoustics experts reported that there were four separate shots. The analysis was said to be ninety-five percent sure that this was the case and since there was no possible way one firearm could fire four shots that quickly, there must have been another shooter involved in the plot to assassinate President Kennedy. If there were two guns and two shooters, this meant that Kennedy had been killed as a part of a conspiracy.

The committee went to the press on December 30, 1978 with this new and significant finding in the Kennedy assassination. The HSCA reported to the media that the assassination was a part of a “probable conspiracy.” When it composed its report on the assassination, the "Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations of the U.S. House of Representatives”, which was released in 1979, the HSCA stated that “on the basis of evidence…President John F. Kennedy was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy.”

This was a landmark finding as so many Americans had already come to believe, by previous media bombardments, that JFK was assassinated as a part of a conspiracy. Theories on a conspiracy to assassinate President varied: the finger was pointed at the Soviet Union, Cuba, the Mafia and even the U.S. government. The HSCA report, though, said the probably conspiracy to kill Kennedy was not organized by any of these groups. It did not have any evidence or suggestions as to who was actually involved in a possible conspiracy.

Yet, by October 1982, the House’s finding that Kennedy was assassinated by a conspiracy was disproven. The tapes that the committee had used determine four shots, and thus a conspiracy, were proven inaccurate. Policeman H.B. McClain who was the officer whose radio was said to have recorded the shots strongly believed that it could have not been his radio that did so, as he was in the wrong place for such a recording and he had actually gone along with the president’s car after the president had been shot. Thus, the radio should have also recorded sirens, but it had not. Also McClain said he was not even on that radio channel, but rather on the motorcade procession’s channel. Thus, the tapes that had changed Americans views about the assassination with such shocking results, in reality were faulty. In order to reassess the results, the tapes were reexamined by the National Academy of Sciences. Their study of the tapes

37 Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations of the U.S. House of Representatives.
proved that the recording came from an unknown location, but that was irrelevant as the recording of the supposed fourth shot had been made a minute after Kennedy’s assassination.

The analysis of the tapes proved to come too late, though. The findings, released in October 1982, showed that there were only three shots, not four. That was over three years after the HSCA had stirred up the pot of conspiracy theories, though. With three years to build up and come to believe that the assassination of John F. Kennedy was actually a conspiracy, it was too little and too late for the public’s mind to be changed. Having had already been pushed to have doubts in the fact that Oswald had acted alone, with major media coverage of Jim Garrison’s investigations amongst many other sources, why should the public now believe that it was not a conspiracy? An investigation of the assassination by the HSCA had proven that it was a conspiracy, only to be reversed to say that it was not. It was not something that the public could easily grapple with. Thus, according to a Gallup poll, over eighty percent of Americans at that point doubted the truth had come about who had really killed Kennedy. 38

Americans were confused about the Kennedy assassination. Two separate government reports had offered different views of the assassination, yet neither seemed to answer all the questions surrounding it. Instead maybe, especially with the case of the HSCA, more questions had arisen out of the investigation of Kennedy’s assassination. With such contradictions and lack of belief in the government investigations on the assassination, perhaps most Americans will never truly come to understand or believe findings about the assassination. Such feelings of misunderstanding will continue to be shown in Chapter IV.

While the media’s uncovering of Watergate directly affected the presidency of Richard Nixon, Watergate indirectly affected the American beliefs concerning the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The media’s push for answers surrounding the Watergate scandal led to a general desire for other governmental issues to be uncovered. One of those happened to be the investigation of Kennedy’s assassination. With new feelings of distrust for the government built up by the media, the House of Representatives Special Committee on Assassinations came to be formed and out of it came further problems involving the assassination of Kennedy, for instead of asserting governmental truth in answering questions of Kennedy’s death, ultimately the committee led to further confusion and doubts by the majority of Americans. Therefore, while the media did not originally start its efforts of investigation to re-open the case of Kennedy’s assassination, in investigating Watergate it did so. The profound effect that the media’s work caused perhaps deserves its own scandal name: JFK assassination-gate.
Chapter IV: A Return to the Media Hype Twenty-Five Years Later

By 1988, November 22, 1963 was becoming history. A quarter of a century had passed since that historic day. 1988 surely had its own newsworthy happenings, yet the media chose to take a new look at JFK’s assassination. There had been no legitimate new facts or leads in the Kennedy assassination since the House had investigated the case in 1979. Still, the media utilized the twenty-fifth anniversary as a time to explore the information surrounding the assassination.

While the assassination of John F. Kennedy would be difficult to forget, the mass coverage of the assassination’s twenty-fifth anniversary made sure it would not be, and neither would President Kennedy’s memory. While in 1963, there had been a limited number of stations, by 1988 cable television had been well-established and with it came many more channels. With an increase in television, at least eighteen specials on Kennedy and his assassination appeared in November 1988. There was a great deal of media coverage on the general news programs as well.39

The media coverage of the twenty-fifth anniversary served to replay the assassination to viewers. In case one had forgotten the details of that horrid day, the media was there, twenty five years later, to remind them. Many specials went through the events of that day, showing footage of the president’s trip to Dallas from Lovey Field to the motorcade and then replaying the media coverage after the president had been shot.

A&E’s November 22, 1988 anniversary special “JFK: As it Happened” went so far as to replay NBC’s coverage of the assassination from November 22, 1963. Thus, not only reminding

viewers of the event, but actually making them relive the experience of the news that the
president had been shot and killed. If viewers had ever forgotten the drama and worry of waiting
to hear how President Kennedy’s condition was, A&E would not let them forget. Watching the
news coverage of November 22, 1963, even year’s later, leaves viewers feeling unsettled.40

The title of NBC’s special “That Day in November”, gives the suggestion that there is a
single day, “that day” that is to be remembered and known by all. This special that aired on
November 22, 1988 plays on nostalgia, bringing viewers back to the times of 1963. The special
presents the positive, exciting things going on in the culture of 1963, contrasting those with the
harshness that seemed to be the 1980s. It is as if after “that day” the hopefulness of the world
seemed to have diminished; all was well under Kennedy, and after him all has been lost. So, the
media has come to associate Kennedy with hope and greatness.41

Contrasting with the portrayed positive outlook of 1963, the day Kennedy was killed is
called a “calamity” in “That Day in November”. Various interviewees explained their shock and
grief of the news of Kennedy’s assassination. And it wasn’t just America, but the whole world is
described to have “stood still for a moment” upon hearing of President Kennedy’s death. One
even says that everything he had believed in died when Kennedy died. Another shared that he
still feels the sadness and loss of Kennedy twenty-five years later. According to the special,
JFK’s death meant something to everyone.42

It is these strong, emotional words that push viewers to remember their own feelings of
the loss of President Kennedy. These evoking words used by the NBC program give off the

40 “NBC News Live Coverage of President J.F.K’s Assassination Part 1 (Friday 11/22/1963) - YouTube.” YouTube -
42 “That Day in November,” (NBC).
feeling that viewers too should have these same grieving feelings. If viewers have moved on from Kennedy’s death or never felt such deep passion for his loss, then perhaps they too should. One should never forget, and if they do, the media will be sure to remind you to grieve for the fallen president.

As Tom Brokaw opens in “That Day in November”, “Now, twenty-five years later, we’re still struggling to deal with loss, the myths and the memories of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.” Such types of statements make this struggle a universal American sentiment. It is to be American to need to keep this struggle alive and continue to think of the Kennedy assassination. For, the media continues to focus on Kennedy and thus keep him in the minds of Americans.

In remembering JFK twenty-five years later his legend was dually noted. As Tom Brokaw said on “That Day in November”, Kennedy’s legacy could not be killed, even though he was. Through the media’s recollections of Kennedy this is true. He is described in the media as an amazing politician, a brilliant man, a symbol of Camelot, a war hero, a star and the list goes on.

Thus, John F. Kennedy was portrayed by the media as a great success as both a leader and human being. Yet, historians began assessing the validity to these claims around the time of the twenty-fifth assassination. It was becoming clearer that these claims of Kennedy as almost as superhuman or superhero figure were not all that accurate. He had flaws. He cheated on his

43 “That Day in November,” NBC.
44 “That Day in November,” NBC.

Still, while historians were attempting to get the truth out about Kennedy’s life, the media tried to brush over the moderated views of Kennedy for more positive, idealistic views of him as a hero. Keeping such an image of Kennedy alive allowed the media to continue to use him as a figure the public was and still is drawn to. Movies, television shows and books about Kennedy’s life and assassination were of interest to the public in part because of that image of Kennedy. An ABC Nightline special put well, “If the Kennedys hadn’t existed, Hollywood would have made them up. But they did, so Hollywood reinvented them.”\footnote{Nightline. November 22, 1988 (ABC).}

Another method the media utilizes is the questioning of the assassination and Kennedy’s life. NBC’s “That Day in November”, as well as many other media stories, kept the curiosity alive about Kennedy. A popular question in this special is if Vietnam would have turned out differently had Kennedy lived. The answer NBC gives: we can never know what would have been. Yet, questions like that remained popular in 1988.

ABC’s November 22, 1988 special edition of Nightline dotes on other unanswerable questions as well. Relating to the assassination itself, ABC asked which of the many theories on the assassination is correct and will we ever know? Author James Reston, Jr. was featured on the special claiming that Lee Harvey Oswald had been attempting to kill Governor John Connally rather than Kennedy. When asked if we can ever really know Oswald’s motives for the assassination, even Reston admits that it true that we will probably never know.
Still, because of the media’s obsession with JFK’s assassination, it is irrelevant that these types of questions can never be answered. It is more interesting and profitable for the media to ask the questions and stir up the pot, then to leave the unanswerable to rest. For, asking such open-ended questions leaves room for the media to continue to have a story in the Kennedy assassination even twenty-five years later. This is apparent in Time magazine’s November 28, 1988 issue. The cover story asks: “JFK’s Assassination: Who Was the Real Target?” This article covers Reston’s argument that Oswald wanted to kill Governor Connally instead of Kennedy.\textsuperscript{47}

The fact that such a question was being raised twenty-five years later and landing on the cover of a major magazine was only possible, because Kennedy’s assassination was still of interest to the media. TIME knew that such a story could bring public attention and would be read in the interest of perhaps of at last putting something to rest in the Kennedy assassination. But, ultimately the questions of Oswald’s motives will almost certainly remain unanswerable. So TIME’s playing up the importance of Reston’s theory of the assassination made for the continued attention of the topic by the public. The assassination therefore remained relevant, because the media places it where the general public is looking- in this case a major magazine cover.

Additionally, the question of whether or not Kennedy was killed as a part of a conspiracy remained popular in 1988. In ABC’s Nightline special the question of conspiracy is shown to hold true in America’s minds still at that time, as many Americans believed that is was a conspiracy even if they had not felt that way at the time of the assassination. Having had twenty-

five years of various news sources pondering upon the idea of conspiracy, it is no wonder why it
would be so much more popular of a thought for Americans in 1988, than in 1963. Especially
with all that America had been through at this time, such as Watergate and Vietnam, in the 1980s
Americans doubted the government, doubting if it had been truthful in placing the blame of
Kennedy’s assassination solely on Oswald.  

Such a belief in a conspiracy by most Americans became further influenced three years
after the twenty-fifth anniversary of the assassination. In 1991, the blockbuster, earning over
two hundred million dollars worldwide, JFK was released. This movie found its beginnings in
1988, though, as it was in 1988 that Jim Garrison published his book, On the Trails of the
Assassination about his investigation of JFK’s assassination and the trial of Clay Shaw.
Garrison’s book argues that the assassination was a conspiracy.

In taking part of his inspiration from Garrison’s conspiracy theory, Director Oliver
Stone’s JFK movie focuses on the idea of conspiracy. The movie follows Garrison’s
investigations of the assassination as well as the trial that Garrison conducted against Shaw.
Garrison is portrayed as an American hero, fighting for the truth and standing up against the
corrupt government. He represents the good triumphing over evil. In reality Garrison’s
investigations were flawed, filled with bribes and falsehoods.

48 Nightline, November 22, 1988 (ABC).
50 Jim Garrison, On the Trail of the Assassins: My Investigation and Prosecution of the Murder of President
already been making controversial films that were critical of the American government, specifically its involvement
in the Vietnam War. In his films Platoon (1986) and Born on the Fourth of July (1989), Stone used his own horrors
as a soldier in Vietnam.
52 William D. Romanowski, “Oliver Stone’s JFK,” Journal of Popular Film & Television 21 (Summer 1993),
53 Epstein, “Counterplot.”
While some of the occurrences in the film are factual, much of it re-done for dramatic effect. Video in the film is made to seem real, but in reality was made for the film, such as remade clips of the assassination itself. But, this becomes confusing as there are actual videos from the assassination within the film. Additional characters are added, facts of the assassination are altered and words are uttered that never were said in real life. Thus, the film created false memories for viewers. \(^{54}\) Such was another way that the media could transform the ideas of the public in view of the assassination.

Additionally, the ideas in movie that is meant to be taking place in the late 1960s include information that was not known of until the 1970s and 80s. Oliver Stone explained these disparities from reality as a “seamless jigsaw puzzle.” To him the pieces all came together for the first time to explain what truly happened. \(^{55}\) In reality though, the puzzle does not fit together in the case of the movie *JFK*. Instead, it brings many ideas together that do not fit together, yet the audience is encouraged to believe that they do. The movie seems to show that the mystery all along has been solved, and in fact was solved in 1967 by Garrison.

There have been many fictional movies about John F. Kennedy’s assassination, yet none seem to have left the mark that *JFK* did on the general public. In a July 1992 edition of *Entertainment Weekly*, twenty-four percent of those polled said that the movie had changed their view about the assassination. \(^{56}\) Many people accepted the movie as fact and thus many Americans came to believe that the assassination had been a conspiracy all along.

It seems ridiculous that one could take a theatrical movie as the solution to the mystery of the Kennedy assassination after twenty-eight years. Yet, it did happen, because the movie is so

\(^{54}\) Epstein, “Counterplot.”
\(^{55}\) Romanowski, “Oliver Stone's JFK.”
\(^{56}\) *Entertainment Weekly*, July 17, 1992:25.
believable. Stone was able to use his directorial skills to play into fears that Americans had already had in their mind.\textsuperscript{57} Unless one has studied the Kennedy assassination in detail, it is easy to fall into this trap as many Americans, even well-educated Americans, did. For, the movie \textit{JFK} makes resolution of the mystery real. If it were true then America could finally allow their doubts to be quelled and Kennedy to rest in peace.

So, in one sense the media’s influence through \textit{JFK} negatively affected the way the public views the assassination of John F. Kennedy by distorting the truth. At the same time, though, the movie did play a major role in the push of the release of previously classified documents concerning the assassination. The President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992 was passed by Congress, known as the \textit{JFK} Act. In addition to documents release, the Act created the U.S. Assassinations Review Board was created and worked to interview witnesses of the assassination until 1998. Yet, the Board was not meant to solve the assassination, but rather collect information.\textsuperscript{58} Thus, \textit{JFK} had created the positive action of releasing classified documents. Even with this the case was not solved and Americans were left more confused, believing in the false ideas of the movie, especially considering that the film led to an influx of books on the assassination.\textsuperscript{59}

By 1988 the media had been covering the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in various forms and directions. But it was 1988, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the assassination, that required no other event to spur the media frenzy back to the topic of JFK. Instead the anniversary served as a marker for how long the mystery of the assassination had gone on for, and probably always would go on for. Yet it also served as a sign that the media was not going

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Romanowski, “Oliver Stone's JFK.”
\item Romanowski, “Oliver Stone's JFK.”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
to put its assassination coverage to rest anytime soon either. For, whenever it seemed to be
dying down something new would bring it up again as the anniversary did in the case.

The media in 1988 played on the emotions of Americans by replaying and rehashing the
events of November 22, 1963. It made people think about the event again and try to put their
own memory and feelings into perspective. It proved that even though historians could
downplay the success and greatness of JFK, the media’s positive spin on his legacy would
always be more appreciated by popular culture as the preferred form. With the renewed media
interest in 1988, the so-called “mystery” behind the death of JFK would not be laid to rest any
time soon.
Conclusion

Within moments of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination, the media had begun coverage of the event. Initial coverage shaped the views of that assassination by the American public had begun to be shaped. This initial coverage of the assassination by the media would serve as the first major point in which the media shaped the historical memory of Kennedy’s assassination. The obsessive coverage by the media in the four days following the assassination that would leave the question of what really happened unanswered to this day, as the media played a role in the death of Lee Harvey Oswald. While the media was still producing films and books on the assassination in the meantime, the next major point of media coverage came in 1967 when the media uncovered the investigation of Attorney General Jim Garrison. While the media soon realized that Garrison’s investigation was a sham, it still continued to put him in the headlines as well as on television. This coverage of Garrison’s assassination investigation seemed to bring merit to the American public about the idea of a conspiracy as well as a lack of trust in the government. This lack of faith in the American government led to the next point of media coverage of the assassination, as the Watergate scandal was uncovered by journalists. This media attention on the government led to the formation of the House Special Committee on Assassinations, out of which a probable conspiracy was incorrectly reported to the American public. This further increased an American belief in Kennedy’s assassination by conspiracy. Finally, the fourth point of media influence on the assassination occurred with the twenty-fifth anniversary of Kennedy’s assassination. At this point the media revived the public interest of JFK, leading to many more books and movies, most influentially JFK, to be released and to further shape the views of the assassination by the public.
Today in 2012 John F. Kennedy is as popular as ever. Within the past few years there have been movies, television series, books, radio chats, you name it, that have been released on John F. Kennedy and his assassination. This is the media’s continued effect on how we remember Kennedy. Still, we have to wonder why JFK is so relevant in popular culture still to this day. Perhaps, with the upcoming fiftieth anniversary, another major point of media influence on Kennedy’s assassination is appearing before our eyes.
Bibliography

Books


Journal Articles


Newspaper and Magazine Articles


**Government Documents**


*Sheppard v Maxwell*, 384 U.S. 333 (1966)


**Radio Broadcasts**

Television Broadcasts

http://www.youtube.com/user/DavidVonPein1


*Jacqueline Kennedy: In Her Own Words*, September 2011 (ABC).


*The Kennedys*, April 2011, Kennedys Production.


Films

