In March of 1992, underground rock poster artist Frank Kozik created a dazzling and outrageous advertisement for the punk bands Helmet and L7. Silkscreened in fluorescent blue, green, and gold is a blown-up, grainy image of Lee Harvey Oswald, a closeup of the alleged presidential assassin at just the moment Jack Ruby pumped the deadly slugs into his stomach. Oswald's mouth open in anguish, his eyes closed tightly from the pain—we have seen this image countless times before. Yet in Kozik's poster, Oswald's face has been photomontaged with a hand holding a microphone so that now the open mouth appears to be screaming out a song, now the closed eyes appear to be lost in the rhythmic fury of punk rage.

Kozik's imagery is well chosen, for the poster advertises not just any rock performance, but the tour of two bands through Texas, their last stop being Dallas and a club located on Elm Street, the same street that runs through Dealey Plaza and on which JFK was assassinated. For thirty years a figure of fascination and attempted redemption for a subculture often on the margins, Oswald in Kozik's art finally gets the microphone and sings to his underground audience. For thirty years a political mystery and site of debate, the Kennedy assassination in this poster is imaged as entertainment, literally "on tour"—as it seems to have been since November 1963. Indeed, Kozik's silkscreen is but a more recent manifestation of work that appropriates and redefines assassination imagery, continuing a process inaugurated by pop art and underground film during the sixties, carried on by experimental video, and sustained by the Hollywood cinema. Its presentation of alleged assassin as angry young rock star (he was, after all, only twenty-four when he died) not only continues the persistent reidentifications of Oswald—lone gunman, government agent, conspiracy patsy—but continues an assault on the "official" framers of assassination discourse, those supports of mainstream culture whose legitimacy was assailed by assassination skeptics.

Imaging the Assassination

Perhaps no set of imagery has toured the cultural landscape as much as that referring in some way to the death of JFK. Since Kennedy and Oswald were

killed, the photographic evidence of their deaths and the accompanying narratives have circulated through government commissions and investigative agencies, the print and televised press, museums of high culture and strange collections of camp, the research of assassination critics and the products of commercial filmmaking. It is an increasingly familiar imagery—for many, still intriguing, occasionally shocking, and often frustrating; for others, banal, even tiresome. Yet this imagery remains at the center of a political dispute which has not ended and which, during the sixties and seventies, contributed to a culture of dissent that struck at a wide array of social institutions and psychic structures. Unlike the resistance to the war in Southeast Asia and the battle for civil rights, surely the period's defining political struggles, the debate over who killed JFK was fought not in the streets but over an ever-widening discursive field. That field was dominated by visual representation and characterized by a complex struggle over access to and interpretation of film and photographic imagery. The debate raised crucial questions about who should assume the authorship of history: the state's voice in the Warren Commission, the commission's critics, (or) the press. The assassination debates (as I will refer to them) manifested quite publicly Michel Foucault's ideas about the often-invisible politics of looking: "Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes."[1] Here Foucault is speaking specifically about Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, a physical structure for discipline and punishment, but his understanding of power in terms of the visible aptly characterizes the political contests found in the assassination debates. How those debates became the focal point for a protracted struggle over camera vision and historical authorship and how the images and issues stemming from the case have been inscribed in art and film over the last thirty years is the subject of this book.

The "distribution of bodies"—Foucault's phrase is nearly perfect in its applicability to the authorial and interpretive struggles that characterize this subject: various bodies, their positioning in a black Lincoln convertible before, during, and after the impact of bullets shot from one or more high-powered rifles, their location in windows or on a grassy knoll. The location of these bodies on various dates in New Orleans or Mexico City or Dallas or the Soviet Union or Atsugi, Japan. Further, the construction and reconstruction of bodies through tampered photographs and bungled autopsies. And "surfaces, lights, gazes": the publication and censoring of film evidence, the constant and obsessive study of photographs, the endless replay of a twenty-six-second film shot by a Dallas dressmaker, images of a plaza or of a face enlarged or computer enhanced, appearing suddenly as if excerpted from some structural film, transformed into grain or shadow, and returned in some minimalist way to pure surface and light. Combined with the "dis-

tribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes," and fully implicated in their dispersion into society, were the operations of narrative, the multiple efforts by the government and its critics to make the evidence cohere in a stable and legible story. Roland Barthes's understanding of narrative—that it is constructed out of a need "to end, to fill, to join, to unify . . . as though it were prey to some obsessive fear: that of omitting a connection"—describes the impulse behind efforts to reconstruct a coherent account out of the events surrounding the president's death.[2]

A Structure for Study

A consideration of three separate yet related sites for the combination of image and narrative make up this project: (1) the central image-based texts and the discursive practices that informed the government's investigations and media reportage; (2) a series of nonmainstream texts, works associated with the American avant-garde cinema or with sixties' pop art which refigure assassination issues through alternative stylistic strategies; and (3) a small group of commercial films inscribed by the discourses of the assassination which in turn contributed through their values and narrative formats to the persistent rearticulation of those discourses.

The structure of this study follows two trajectories: one tries to maintain a chronological discussion; the other separates texts according to their mode of production and formal characteristics. The chronological sequence is crucial to my efforts at placing this diverse and increasingly mobile imagery within a discursive context that built up unevenly but decisively through a process of accumulation. It is precisely this sense of chronology that I will be trying to construct so that linkages between various journalistic practices, films, and artwork can be brought into relief. Yet it is also important that art forms be discussed within a framework that positions them next to their textual kin, whether that relationship springs from a shared method of production or of exhibition.

Although my organization might appear to make the case, I am not prepared to argue that the avant-garde is always the first field of culture to confront current or newly emerging historical topics. Certainly, pop art and underground film absorbed assassination discourses before the commercial narrative cinema. But one easily recalls moments when Hollywood moved relatively quickly to image a contemporary subject, whether World War II or the plight of the returning vet. With the breakdown of the classic studio system, that kind of production efficiency has shifted to television, the electronic medium becoming increasingly swift in its transformation of news story into docudrama. It may well be that this tendency in television programming is the result of a late sixties' and seventies' cinema that was not

just interested in topicality but also conveyed a cynicism toward society not witnessed in the popular arts since film noir. Undoubtedly, the new broadcasting technologies and more portable equipment that changed the nature of television news and forced public confrontation with images of war, whether in Southeast Asia or on American campuses, accelerated the process by which television in all its formats would come to deal with contemporary historical events.[3] If in the mid-sixties the industrial story-telling culture did lag behind the plastic arts in responding to events, this gap seems to have closed during the period of political contestation that framed the assassination inquiries.

The point of examining these three sites of textual practice is not to rerun the facts and speculations of the assassination mystery. Although certain details of the oft-repeated evidence will resurface here, my purpose is not to weigh in on one side or the other, for or against the findings of the Warren Commission. My point, especially with respect to the government's investigations and the media's reporting, is to theorize the status of the film and photographic image as it developed amid one of the period's defining and intriguing political debates, and then to register its impact on and incorporation within various image-making arts. With each anniversary of Kennedy's death, artifacts and images of the event continue to surface along the channels of mainstream and marginal culture. Image bites of the motorcade or of Lee Harvey Oswald are rerun on television news programs. Postmodern publications, from underground comics to the seriously semiotic, create or explore the once-scandalous imagery. In part, this book is an attempt to tether these seemingly free-floating signifiers of assassination imagery in the context of a history of representational practice. But I do not intend a comprehensive survey of all the ways in which some aspect of the assassination has been incorporated in pop culture. Its presence in, say, punk rock or science fiction will go undiscussed here, although any subsequent study of these might find a companion in my analysis. The presence of assassination imagery in diverse social locales is not a recent phenomenon. My discussion of these sites — the mainstream and alternative press, pop art, soft-core pornography, the collectibles of camp, the underground and commodity cinema — seeks to elaborate an epistemological setting for these practices.

In his essay "Periodizing the Sixties," Frederic Jameson suggests that the JFK assassination functioned as a crucial detonator for the decade, one that undermined the faith of a new generation and may have meant "the dramatic defeat of some new spirit of public or civic idealism."[4] I would suggest that this erosion of civic spirit resulted not only from Kennedy's shocking and untimely death but in great measure as a response to the post-Dallas investigations — given the inadequacy of the government's inquiry and the diversity, ferocity, and potentially scandalous character of the government's

critics. In other words, something beyond a loss of idealism made the assassination a detonator for its own decade as well as the decades to follow, something that can be registered only when the focus shifts from the event in isolation to the full-blown critique of the state that developed around its interpretation. This critique of the state must, of course, be viewed in the larger context of sixties' social unrest; I do not mean to suggest that the assassination debates alone be credited over all other social and political processes with erosion of the state's power to control public debate. The overriding factor on this point remains the contestation around the definition and waging of the Vietnam War. Indeed, the arguments generated by many assassination critics were severely limited by the frequently narrow scope of their analysis, by their overinvestment in solving the Dallas mystery, and by their subscription to Camelot mythology. Efforts by Warren Commission critics must be read within the wider context of debate. The critics gave the assassination the appearance of a defining cultural signifier because its solution seemed to require a no less persistent (if far less visible) questioning of the government. Indeed, the political accusations and scandalous imagery that informed the assassination debates often shadowed, in a sinister, uncanny fashion, those other well-known and more visible movements that challenged the legitimacy or activities of the state.

Commenting on the sense of historical rupture occasioned by the killing of JFK, Christopher Lasch has written:

His murder plunged the country into a time of troubles, or at least coincided, more or less, with the beginnings of a turbulent era. The United States has had a long history of political assassinations; but it is only in the last generation that assassinations have come to serve as one more piece of evidence—interpreted in conformity with already existing beliefs about history and politics—that things are falling apart.[5]

Lasch's comment that only within the last generation have assassinations been read in conformity with other widespread political and social problems begins to address my point: John Kennedy's death may not be the most significant aspect of his assassination. What was of crucial importance was the struggle over its framing. The evidence that something was "falling apart," to use Lasch's phrase, was the government's inability to author(ize) a coherent and believable account of the assassination and of the events surrounding that day in Dallas. What made the assassination political, then, beyond the subtle change in power and its possible ideological motives and execution, was its textual encoding, its telling and retelling, the very struggle over its transformation into history.

The *assassination debates,* more strictly defined, refers to those texts and activities devoted to the study, investigation, or interpretation of the events

related to and surrounding Kennedy's death. It is not limited to a set of books or articles or imagery, although it obviously includes these and other textual matter, but refers also to a set of practices or social relations through which investigative or reportorial texts were produced and circulated. With the release of Oliver Stone's *JFK* in December 1991, the debate reemerged on the national agenda with a force it had not known since the years immediately following the release of the report of the House Select Committee on Assassinations in July 1979. In response to the public dialogue reignited by the conspiracy theory presented in Stone's film, the federal government once again focused energy on the case, most specifically through efforts to make public the remaining secret files on its investigations. Beyond these "official" actions, Stone's film reanimated questions about the relationship between film and the writing of history. The thirtieth anniversary of the assassination witnessed a flurry of new texts, both print and televised, which sustained the dialogue. Subsequent anniversaries may well bring more of the same. Despite efforts by the mainstream press, fueled by its own backlash against Stone's film, to celebrate Gerald Posner's 1993 book and declare along with its title, *Case Closed,* the debate over the assassination continues.[6] The writing of the assassination's various histories seems a long way from an end.

Two methodological problems are worth noting here. First, in what temporal mode should my analysis be fashioned? Since the issues, images, and narratives being discussed are constantly being rearticulated, should the historical account be referred to in the past or the present tense? Ideally I should suggest that, whereas most of the events and discourses discussed in this book are placed in the past, their social meanings are subject to revision by still-active investigatory practices, both reportorial and artistic. Related to this is a second problem, one that is certainly not specific to my project. I am thinking of what Dominic LaCapra has termed *transference* — what is, in his words, "at play, in history, that is, in the very relation of the historian to the 'object' of study. Transference in this somewhat more indirect and attenuated sense refers to the manner in which the problems at issue in the object of study reappear (or are repeated with variations) in the work of the historian."[7] Assassination critics' "obsessive fear of omitting a connection" to use Barthes's phrase, is difficult to resist, as the encyclopedic (yet often one-dimensional) character of some of their work would seem to testify. The myriad "facts" and multiple scenarios cannot help but overwhelm studies of this material, and the question of how much background detail to supply the reader poses a persistent dilemma. Much of what follows in this introduction attempts to respond to this problem. The case of JFK's death is complex enough for those who have worked with it for many years. Rather than make yet another all-inclusive gesture, I will attempt to assemble some

of the events in a narrative chronology of the significant assassination literature. For those who have followed the case closely, this section will no doubt be familiar. It is provided here so that the in-depth analyses in the following chapters can be free of the obsessive concerns implied in Barthes's phrase and so that the analysis can move less hesitatingly between survey and specificity.

At the outset note the recurring centrality of the assassination case for the period under discussion. It resonated far beyond the much-discussed psychological imprint, the widespread testimony by individuals as to where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news of Kennedy's death. At least six government investigations or studies—five at the federal level and one state/local—were conducted into or as a result of the assassination:

- The Warren Commission's investigation initiated on November 29, 1963, and completed with the public release of its report on September 27, 1964. (The Warren Report was itself founded in part on a five-volume FBI report delivered on December 9, 1963.)
- An inquiry by a panel of pathologists appointed by Attorney General Ramsey Clark in February 1968 who examined the available autopsy photographs and x rays.
- The 1968 conspiracy trial of Clay Shaw brought by New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison.
- The report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence issued in October 1969, in large part initiated in response to the assassinations of JFK, Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr.
- The Rockefeller Commission's investigation of the CIA, begun in March 1975, which devoted a section of its report to possible links between the assassination and various CIA operatives.
- The report of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, begun in 1976 and issued on July 22, 1979.[8]

Even when it was not the subject of government inquiry, the assassination was continually on the nation's journalistic agenda. Between 1963 and 1979 over 2,300 articles and books were devoted to some aspect of the assassination or the ongoing inquiry.[9] The national television networks returned to the subject throughout the thirty years following the assassination, CBS being the most interested. The CBS coverage included at least one program each year from 1963 to 1965, a four-part series in June 1967, a two-part inquiry broadcast in November 1975, and a two-hour report marking the thirtieth anniversary in November 1993. Pollsters inquired as to the people's faith in the Warren Commission's conclusions nearly every year. Before the House assassinations committee convened in 1976, at least

three public interest groups — the Citizens' Commission of Inquiry, the Assassination Information Bureau, and the Committee to Investigate Assassinations — were established to disseminate information and spearhead efforts to launch a new federal investigation.[10] Numerous inquiry groups were formed after the assassination's twenty-fifth anniversary.[11]

As I've suggested, the assassination debates went beyond some notion of resonance. They were more than an echo rebounding in the press every couple of years. They contributed directly to a growing culture of skepticism and to a critique of the affirmative ideology of what officially took place in November 1963, an ideology that now seems even more distant than the years might suggest.[12] More specifically, the assassination inquests took part in multiple efforts to disrupt the political hegemony of the federal government; to expose and condemn the war in Southeast Asia, CIA activities, the FBI's infiltration of domestic organizations, and the state's overall abuse of power.

Perhaps most important was the attack leveled against the federal government's control of discourse and the state's claim to authoring (and authorizing) contemporary history. One of the defining characteristics of the period was the effort by disenfranchised individuals or marginalized groups to take control of activities generally carried out by the centralized government. The popular interventions by women or students or blacks succeeded, at points, in transgressing "the boundaries of power," and some of these interventions offered compelling challenges to established interpretations of history.[13] The assassination debates directly addressed this form of contestation, marking a process whereby the state lost authority and whereby its power to control public debate suffered a disruption, even a disintegration. At the same time, and closely related to this disruption, was a similar crisis for the "official" media and their role as legitimators, their function as supports for the government's claim to interpreting history and current events.

A History of Assassination Literature

Long before the release of the Warren Report in September 1964, the history of JFK's assassination was being constructed by the media, especially the print media.[14] Although occasional questions were raised about the commission's procedures, doubts as to the level of involvement of its celebrated members or concerns about possible links between Lee Harvey Oswald and agencies of the U.S. government, the vast majority of mainstream news reports conformed to a story originally circulated by the Associated Press and United Press International. That story, constructed within an hour of the assassination, parts of which would remain intact in the official government version, maintained that three shots were fired at the presiden-

tial motorcade, all three coming from the Texas School Book Depository building to the right and behind the president and all three fired by a single assassin named Lee Harvey Oswald. The alleged assassin was apprehended one hour and twenty minutes later in the Texas Theater. However, the account given in early press reports, stating that the first shot hit Kennedy, the second hit Governor John Connally, and the third hit Kennedy again, would be changed in the version offered by the Warren Commission in September of the following year. Forced to account for one bullet's totally missing the motorcade and for the time constraints imposed on Oswald's alleged firing time by the evidence contained in the Zapruder film, the commission amended the initial accounts and concluded that one bullet passed through the bodies of both Kennedy and Connally. This would come to be known as the magic bullet.

Media attention then quickly shifted for a time from the logistics of the shooting to the background of the alleged assassin. Oswald was labeled a Marxist and a psychopath whose brief residence in the Soviet Union and alleged political affiliations with pro-Castro Cuban organizations were promoted as signs of implicit guilt. In December 1963 and January 1964 the FBI report on its investigation, as well as the work-in-progress of the Warren Commission, were leaked to elements of the mainstream press, and it was duly reported that both official groups were concluding what had so far been put forth as the correct version of events: the lone assassin theory. *Time* magazine declared there was "little doubt of Oswald's guilt," and in February 1964 *Life* magazine pictured Oswald on its cover with the tag "Lee Oswald with the weapons he used to kill President Kennedy and Officer Tippit." Indeed, three months earlier, on the very day that Lyndon Johnson appointed the Warren Commission, *Life* published in its November 29 issue a photograph taken from the window on the sixth floor of the School Book Depository. Under the photograph, the magazine's text declared that this was the site from which the assassin had fired the fatal shots. *Life* seemed in a particularly good position to construct a history of the event, for it had in its possession the best photographic evidence: Abraham Zapruder's twenty-six seconds of film. The magazine had purchased the film from Zapruder for an estimated $150,000 and thus had exclusive publication rights to it.[15] It had taken only a couple of months for the journalistic community to convict Oswald despite the lack of any thorough or coherent reconstruction of events.

This conviction, however, did not go totally uncontested. Two books released in 1964, Joachim Joesten's *Oswald: Assassin or Fall Guy?*[16] and Thomas Buchanan's *Who Killed Kennedy?*[17] were the first book-length studies of the case issued prior to the release of the Warren Report. Perhaps more important from the long-range standpoint of commission criticism was a series of

articles which began appearing in liberal or left-wing publications during 1965. Vincent Salandria's articles for the January and March issues of the magazine *Liberation* raised serious questions about the medical evidence reported by the Warren Commission. Also in March of 1965 Harold Feldman's article "Fifty-Two Witnesses: The Grassy Knoll" appeared in *Minority of One*. Analyzing eyewitness accounts of the shooting found in the Warren Report's twenty-six volumes of evidence and testimony, it produced quite a different account of what happened in Dealey Plaza. Witnesses told of shots from in front of the president and of smoke, possibly gunsmoke, rising from an area near the grassy knoll. A year later, also writing in *Minority of One,* Salandria revealed that the FBI's departmental investigation had reported, contrary to the commission's conclusion, that the nonfatal bullet that had struck Kennedy had in fact not exited his body. Within a year, the government's investigation had been soundly criticized, its investigation made to appear a composite of contradictory reports.

These and other early alternative analyses reveal several crucial aspects of the assassination debates. First, many of the initial counterinquests to critique the government's version had to rely solely on the government's published evidence as a source for their own investigatory work. It soon became clear that the massive *Warren Report* was a text that critics would have to construct and simultaneously deconstruct. The report ran to almost 300,000 words—only a summary of twenty-six volumes containing some 20,000 pages of testimony—yet it was still an incomplete record, its immensity standing as a bulky monument to the elusiveness of historical experience. It thus fell to independent investigators to complete the government's work. The twenty-six volumes of evidence and testimony had no index until 1966 when Warren Commission critic Sylvia Meagher constructed one, a task that took her over a year.[18] Prior to her work, much of the evidence, especially that which contradicted the commission's conclusions, was buried in the narrative chaos of the unindexed volumes.

Much of the assassination critics' early work was thus absorbed in textual analysis of the government's documents. From this they learned that, of the over four hundred persons present in Dealey Plaza the day of the assassination, only around ninety were asked to give testimony. Their first look at the Zapruder film, as reprinted in Volume 18 of the commission's exhibits, suggested to them that Kennedy's head had been thrown violently backwards upon impact of the fatal bullet, a reaction that might point to shots coming from the front rather than the rear of the limousine. Critics further discovered that, as published in Volume 18, the two Zapruder frames immediately following the head wound had been printed out of sequence. That is, frame 315 had been printed as coming before frame 314, thus possibly giving the wrong impression as to which direction the president's head had

moved following impact. These points only begin to hint at the problems uncovered by the first generation of critics, but they suggest the areas of inquiry in which persons without any official investigatory status engaged.

The people doing the digging were not, for the most part, experienced in working with government records, but ordinary folk who simply wanted to know what had happened. Perusing the twenty-six volumes, we found accounts of what was seen and heard in Dealey Plaza mentioned nowhere in the Warren Report.

The process was slow and laborious, like learning the names and locations of numerous extras on a huge movie set. Though the FBI could easily have made a complete compilation while memories were still fresh, this was not done. Consequently, the historical record was pitifully incomplete.[19]

Motivated by a range of factors—grief, skepticism, confusion—a network of unofficial investigators, journalists, and what would become known as assassination buffs began collecting newspaper articles pertaining to the assassination. As contradictions and complexities grew, so did their research into the case. In a June 1967 article on "The Buffs" for the *New Yorker,* Calvin Trillin wrote:

By the first week in February [1964], Shirley Martin, a housewife who then lived in Hominy, Oklahoma, had driven to Dallas with her four children to interview witnesses. Lillian Castellano, a Los Angeles book-keeper who thought that reports on the wounds indicated that the President must have been hit from the front, had studied a picture of the Dealey Plaza area, discovered what seemed to be a strategically placed storm drain in front of the motorcade, and called that fact to the attention of a local news commentator, The Los Angeles Times, the Warren Commission, and anyone else she could think of who might be investigating what had happened.[20]

Within months, this circuit of critics had privately assumed the responsibilities of the federal government in a series of independent and concerted efforts which ultimately resulted in a full-scale attack on the official account of the president's death. In the process, the role of author and interpreter of history became the focus of a protracted struggle. Certainly this struggle was not new. Certainly individuals—among them, historians and journalists—had long before constructed historical texts outside of or in conflict with state practices. But rarely had such a debate over issues of historiography—questions of method or claims to authorship or problems of interpreting evidence—been waged so publicly, nor had its ideological tenor been so dramatically demonstrated across a diverse range of public media. The assassination debates forced into the nation's headlines the crucial questions later articulated by Michel Foucault: "what is an author? what are the

modes of existence of this discourse? where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?"[21]

An inquisition into the government's methodology was an immediate by-product of the earliest independent research. In this category the most notable works were Edward Jay Epstein's *Inquest*[22] and Harold Weisberg's *Whitewash*.[23] The former, begun as a master's thesis at Cornell University, conducted a study of the Warren Commission's procedures and argued convincingly against the image of a thorough and efficient official investigation. A number of mainstream publications were moved to credit *Inquest*, and their sanctioning of Epstein's work appeared to signal improving conditions for Warren Commission critics. Yet the mild acceptance of Epstein's book can probably be attributed to its limited scope. Epstein was, for the most part, content to critique the processes of the commission and did not seek to indict the integrity of its members or argue for any countertheory of assassination. Indeed, in his introduction to *Inquest*, journalist Richard Rovere commended Epstein for not taking part in the "shabby 'demonology'" of the other critics who argued that the commission had intentionally suppressed evidence.

Weisberg's *Whitewash* can be neatly juxtaposed to Epstein's book. Weisberg was clearly one of those "demonologists" to whom Rovere referred. Employing the commission's records against itself, Weisberg argued in this, the first of his many books on the assassination, that Oswald could not have committed the crimes of which he was accused. But, unlike Epstein, Weisberg could find no one to publish his research, no one to confer upon it even the look of scholarship. After a fourteen-month period and rejection from sixty-three U.S. publishers, Weisberg produced the book himself, admitting in its preface that the work appeared in "the least desirable of all forms." He was referring to the typewritten appearance of the manuscript, a form that, however undesirable, aptly characterized the marginalized status of Weisberg's work.

The alternative voices were indeed marginalized during the two years following the assassination, for despite the development of the buff network and the appearance of articles in left-leaning journals, the overwhelming tendency of the mainstream press was to support the Warren Commission's conclusions. Support came in many forms. As mentioned, periodicals with a wide circulation hammered home the lone gunman theory months before the Warren Report was released.[24] When the report was released, *Life, Newsweek, Time* and the *New York Times* hailed its findings. In its issue of September 28, 1964, the *New York Times* printed a forty-eight-page supplement carrying the report and subsequently collaborated with two other publishers to issue it in both hard and soft cover. In the introduction to these editions, journalist Harrison Salisbury wrote: "No material question now re-

mains unresolved so far as the death of President Kennedy is concerned. The evidence of Lee Harvey Oswald's single handed guilt is overwhelming."[25] In December, the newspaper copublished an edition entitled *The Witnesses,* a selection of testimony from the commission hearings. For its part, *Life* turned over editorial space to state authorship in its issue of October 2, 1964, running a story entitled "How the Commission Pieced Together the Evidence — Told by One of Its Members," Congresssman Gerald Ford. Like Salisbury, Ford concluded that the commission's case was airtight: "there is not a scintilla of credible evidence to suggest a conspiracy to kill President Kennedy. The evidence is clear and overwhelming. Lee Harvey Oswald did it."[26]

For roughly three years the politics of affirmation held out over the politics of critique. But it is important to note that the historiographic struggle that had been launched, the public debate over the politics of interpretation, was not confined to contest between the mainstream powerhouses of American publishing, in concert with the government, and the occasional leftist muckraker. Rather, the details of the assassination debates permeated every journalistic genre, its subject matter appropriated by a range of specialty publications. The debate over the conduct and findings of JFK's autopsy was sustained in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and the *American Journal of Physics.* The psychology of the case was considered in such periodicals as *Journal of Personality* and *Psychiatric Quarterly,* the latter reporting on the reactions of "emotionally disturbed adolescent females."[27] Warren Commission procedures and conclusions were analyzed in scores of university law reviews, supermarket tabloids, and local newspapers throughout the country. And the various print media accounts were constantly tracked in *Editor & Publisher* and *Publishers Weekly.*

Then in late 1966 and throughout 1967 the public print debate underwent a transformation, a crucial phase in its history characterized by growing public interest in the arguments of the Warren Commission critics. The general acceptance of Epstein's efforts in *Inquest* played a role in this, as did the appearance of Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgment* in 1966.[28] By this time Lane had been on the case for three years, and much of his public exposure (and self-promotion) had come by way of the campus lecture circuit. His book, in essence a defense brief for Lee Harvey Oswald, relied heavily on interviews with eyewitnesses who were either never called before the commission or whose testimony about possible gunmen on the grassy knoll contradicted the evidence privileged by the Warren Report. Though widely criticized by the popular press at the time and subsequently assailed by other critics for its own omissions and contradictions, Lane's book was enormously influential, staying on the *New York Times* bestseller list for six consecutive months.

1967 brought the publication of the two most thorough attacks on the commission until that time: Sylvia Meagher's *Accessories After the Fact* and Josiah Thompson's *Six Seconds in Dallas*.[29] Meagher had been carrying out a sophisticated attack on the commission for several years, primarily in *Minority of One,* and her book's meticulous refutation of commission findings became a model for subsequent critics. Thompson's work, much of it devoted to a detailed analysis of the physics and logistics of the shooting in Dealey Plaza, came from a somewhat more inside position. As a consultant for *Life,* Thompson had access to the magazine's original print of the Zapruder film as well as to the color transparencies produced from it. Over the course of repeated viewings, he began to construct an alternative theory of assassination. Thompson's hypothesis of a three-assassin conspiracy found a trace of mainstream acceptance when an excerpt of his book ran as a cover story for the December 2, 1967, *Saturday Evening Post.* Its cover headline declared: "Major New Study Shows Three Assassins Killed Kennedy."

The *Post*'s declaration was perhaps not as daring as it might seem, for at the end of the previous year *Life* claimed to have had a radical change of opinion. Its cover story for November 25, 1966, called out: "Did Oswald Act Alone? A Matter of Reasonable Doubt." *Life* had asked John Connally to review the Zapruder film, and the then-governor of Texas repeated his claim that he and Kennedy, contrary to the commission's findings, had been hit by separate bullets. The magazine did allow a rebuttal in the same issue from commission member and magic-bullet author Arlen Specter, but the editors now appeared little convinced by his defense of the Warren Report. The article concluded with the magazine suggesting that a "new investigating body should be set up, perhaps at the initiative of Congress."[30] In fact, *Life* had planned to undertake new research efforts of its own, and the November 25 issue was to be but the first of a series of investigative reports. Ironically, the editors of *Life*'s sister publication, *Time,* chose their issue of the same date to question the efficacy of further assassination probes. Noting "there seems little valid excuse for so dramatic a development as another full-scale inquiry," *Time* referred unflatteringly to commission critics as "hawkshaws," "amateur Sherlocks," "cocktail party dissenters," and a "cult of parlor detectives."[31] The two magazines eventually found common ground, and the planned *Life* series was killed.

The *New York Times* began and then aborted its own investigation in late 1966 under the direction of Harrison Salisbury. Permission to travel to North Vietnam to report on the war in Southeast Asia took Salisbury from the assignment, and the project was scrapped by the beginning of 1967. However, the *Times* saw fit to comment on the emerging skepticism surrounding the Warren Commission's work. Its remarks warrant a close reading because they aptly characterize a position staked out by elements of the

mainstream press at the time. In an editorial headlined "Unanswered Questions," also from November 25, 1966, the paper commented:

There are enough solid doubts of thoughtful citizens, among the shrill attacks on the Warren Commission, now to require answers. Further dignified silence, or merely more denials by the commission or its staff, are no longer enough.

We have come to this conclusion not because of any of the specific charges brought by the dozens of books, TV shows and articles about President Kennedy's assassination but because of the general confusion in the public mind raised by the publication of allegations and the many puzzling questions that have been raised.

Since the whole purpose of the commission's appointment and mission is being eroded a little at a time by the clamor, it would seem the commission itself has the most to answer. Certainly, it should be given a chance.

Its members and staff, in varying degrees, of course, have full knowledge—or should have—of the investigations, evaluations and decisions that went into the report. Until they have spoken, the demands for special Congressional committees, foundation studies and inquiries by prestigious people seem premature.[22]

The dual position straddled by much of the press is captured in the extraordinary second paragraph of this editorial. The *Times,* reluctant—indeed unwilling—to give credit or credence to commission critics or assassination buffs, nonetheless articulated a position clearly persuaded by the accumulated strength of their arguments. The paper was quick to draw a distinction between the so-called public mind and the dreaded "books, TV shows and articles" that had been instrumental in the construction of the "public mind." Published allegations and puzzling questions appear to have an invisible source, one that the paper was unable to recognize amidst the "general confusion." The editorial called not for a new investigation, that being the cry of the "shrill attacks," but for a clarification from the commission as to its decision-making procedures. But a curious phenomenon accompanied this call. In a chronological breakdown, the editorial was written as if the Warren Commission were still at work, as if the investigation were ongoing. The last paragraph cited above ended: "The Warren Commission itself is composed of leading members of Senate and House and responsible citizens, headed by the respected Chief Justice." Yet the commission had released its report to the public over two years earlier, its official investigation long since ended. It might thus be argued that in a rather strange way the commission critics had been so successful at perpetuating what had (and

perhaps should have) been the government's investigatory efforts that the *Times* unconsciously legitimized the critics' work by speaking of the commission's investigation in the present tense. Effacing the critics by denying them any role in their viewpoint, the editors succeeded at becoming lost in their own ellipses; 1964 and 1966 become, if not interchangeable, then at least somewhat collapsible. The editorial's demand for answers combined with its reservations about the premature nature of a new inquiry amounted to a call for procedural closure. As the assassination case grew more complex during 1966 and 1967, this was perhaps the only kind of stopgap request that was at all fit to print.

Although a Louis Harris poll taken in 1967 found that 70 percent of Americans still believed Lee Harvey Oswald was guilty, 54 percent now thought the Warren Commission had left "a lot of unanswered questions about who killed Kennedy."[33] Amid growing public skepticism and increasing criticism of the *Warren Report* in mainstream publications, William Manchester's *The Death of a President* was serialized in *Look* and sold as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Manchester was the only assassination author to have access to and approval of the Kennedy family, and the conclusions he offered essentially agreed with the Warren Commission's findings.[34]

Far more important to the course of the assassination debates, however, was the news of an emerging investigation being undertaken by the district attorney of New Orleans, Jim Garrison. Garrison charged Clay Shaw, a prominent businessman and director of the New Orleans International Trade Mart, with taking part in an assassination conspiracy with several anti-Castro Cubans who were former CIA agents. Although the trial did not get under way until February of 1969, Garrison had as early as 1967 set about publicizing his investigation and enlisting the eager assistance of assassination critics. His efforts were accorded some sympathetic press coverage, most notably *Ramparts'* issue of January 1968. But as media scrutiny increased, the flimsy nature of Garrison's case and the questionable legal tactics he employed were slowly revealed. Attacks on the New Orleans investigation came from traditional Warren Report defenders like *Time* and *Newsweek* as well as from critics Meagher and Epstein.[35] Garrison succeeded in getting the Zapruder film exhibited in the courtroom, and his Cuban conspiracy leads would be pursued by subsequent researchers. But Shaw's acquittal, after the jury deliberated just fifty minutes, along with the overall ineptness of Garrison's investigation, for the most part succeeded in undermining the general credibility of assassination conspiracy theorists, setting back efforts to renew either state or federal government inquiries. The New Orleans debacle continued for some time as both an embarrassment and a cautionary reminder for commission critics. Garrison, himself subsequently

acquitted on federal bribery charges, helped perpetuate the media-manufactured image of the assassination buff as paranoid self-promoter in search of political ghosts. In the shadow of the Garrison trial, the early 1970s contributed little in the way of assassination literature, and what quiet dialogue did continue circulated through more specialized publications. Magazines such as *Computers and Automation* applied computer technology to the photographic evidence, and information was regularly published for the buff network, such as the list of the secret Warren Commission documents deposited in the U.S. Archives.[36]

However, this retreat did not signal wholesale retirement for assassination critics. Indeed, the murders of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., served to fuel the passion and frustration of critics displeased with the official government handling of both cases. One direction they took was to organize the loosely connected network of part-time investigators, writers, and researchers who had independently amassed files of documentation. In 1968 attorney and former Senate committee counsel Bernard Fensterwald formed the Committee to Investigate Assassinations (CTIA). Intended as an agent for the pooling of assassination research, the interviews and randomly collected clues, the leading theories and thousands of press clippings, CTIA also sought to lobby for new congressional action.[37]

More grassroots in its formation and activities was the Assassination Information Bureau (AIB). Officially incorporated in 1974, the AIB had its origins several years earlier in the activities of journalist Bob Katz. Katz, working through correspondence with Richard Sprague, a New York computer analyst, and with graphics assistance by Robert Kutler, initiated a set of presentations entitled "Who Killed Kennedy?"[38] After some successful local appearances in the Boston/Cambridge area and through the arrangements of a Boston booking agency, Katz, now joined by several other Cambridge-area researchers, delivered his presentation at college campuses across the country. When not on the road, the AIB outlined a political agenda for citizen action, a program designed to pressure a new congressional investigation, which included information packets with text and slides for community organization around the topic of political assassination. Despite their investment in grassroots efforts, the AIB saw political success in terms of federal government action. In an article from 1975, the AIB stated: "It was, and remains, the contention of the AIB that private citizens could not themselves answer in full the question of who killed JFK—and indeed we should not be in a position where it is even our responsibility."[39] Among the AIB's most significant achievements was "The Politics of Conspiracy," a three-day conference held at Boston University in January 1975 where over 1,500 people heard presentations from some of the most well known assassination critics.

The Skeptics Revived

By the time of the B.U. conspiracy conference, the question of who killed JFK had reemerged on the national agenda, and commission critics had gained new momentum. Indeed, a number of factors mark 1975 as a watershed year for the investigation. Commenting on a three-day assassination seminar at the University of Hartford, the *New York Times* noted that critique of the Warren Commission "is said to be the hottest topic on the college lecture circuit." The topic had most definitely returned to the newsstand and bookstore. The most significant titles were Robert Sam Anson's *They've Killed the President* and the paperback edition of Thompson's *Six Seconds in Dallas.* Anson had been writing about the assassination for several years, his most important articles appearing in *New Times,* for which he was a national political correspondent. His book both neatly summarized the salient features of the case up to his writing and argued for consideration of a Cuban/CIA/Mafia conspiracy. The release of Thompson's book was significant for the legal victory it represented. In 1967 *Life* had sued Thompson, Bernard Geis Associates, and Random House to prevent publication of the book with reproductions of the Zapruder film, charging that Thompson had in fact stolen parts of the film. Denying the charge, Thompson had his book published that year with charcoal reconstructions of the key Zapruder frames.[40] Eight years later, after a victorious suit against Time-Life, Thompson saw his book reissued with reproductions from the Zapruder film.

A number of magazines also turned their attention back to the case. Detailed studies appeared in *Rolling Stone* and *New Times,* and many of the arguments pro and con conspiracy were briefly summarized in an issue of *Skeptic.*[41] In its September 1975 issue, the *Saturday Evening Post* devoted its cover story to the commission critics, profiling nineteen of the leading assassination researchers and printing a brief "Bibliography for JFK Buffs." It was at this time also that assassination literature found its way increasingly into soft-core pornographic magazines. The interconnections between the assassination debate and issues of pornography will be taken up in a subsequent chapter. For now it is worth noting the appearance of numerous articles, both multipart series and forums, in magazines such as *Penthouse, Playboy, Swank, Gallery,* and *Playgirl.*

The Zapruder film's appearance in Thompson's reissue and Anson's book was accompanied by widespread screenings elsewhere. AIB college presentations had been supplemented by fifth- and sixth-generation bootleg prints. But in 1975 Robert Groden, a New York photo optics expert, completed years of working with Zapruder's film, producing a high-quality, image-enhanced print with crucial sections, primarily frames of Kennedy's head wounds, slowed and magnified. Groden's print was exhibited at the AIB Boston conference in January 1975 and then on March 6 and March 27

of that year, for the first time to a national audience, on the ABC broadcast "Goodnight America" with Geraldo Rivera. Groden would later show his print to federal lawmakers, testify before the Rockefeller Commission, and serve as a consultant to the House assassinations committee.

The exhibition of Groden's print aided researchers and intensified calls for a new investigation. In October 1975, the *New York Times* reported that Senator Richard Schweiker of Pennsylvania had publicly declared that the Warren Report was "like a house of cards; it's going to collapse."[42] The paper then noted that two congressional committees, the Senate's Schweiker-Hart Select Committee on Intelligence and the House's Edwards Committee, would be opening inquiries into federal intelligence and law enforcement agencies' performance during the Warren Commission's investigation. The *Times* piece was characteristically schizophrenic on the subject, labeling critics a "curious mixture" of dignified doubters and an "irrational enclave." Nonetheless, by December 1, 1975, the *Times* was again moved to editorialize on the persistent skepticism concerning the commission's findings. Hoping for a "restoration of the government's reputation," the paper called for a congressional investigation to lay "out all the now-sequestered evidence" and to "establish the extent of the cover-ups." As with its editorial of November 25, 1966, cited above, the *Times* withheld credit from commission critics: "The most powerful arguments for doing so [reopening the case] come not from any of the veteran assassination buffs, but emerge from the secret recesses of the FBI and the CIA themselves."[43]

In fact, the House, Senate, and Rockefeller Commission inquiries into the activities of the FBI and CIA reflected, if not directly followed, the broadening focus of Kennedy assassination critics. Furthermore, these inquiries marked various points where the overlapping terrains of the assassination debates and other political debates became especially obvious. Clearly the JFK inquests always shared a relationship with adjacent political issues, most notably the cold war questions circulating around Oswald's identity and his ties to Cuban interests, the Soviet Union, and various FBI contacts. But whereas during the early and mid-1960s the government sought to suppress these questions, by the mid-1970s, it sought at least in part to expose the connections between conspiracy speculations surrounding the assassination and the more widespread activities of American intelligence organizations.

Indeed, three years prior to the new congressional action and prompted in no small measure by the revelations of Watergate, writers who had focused primarily on an alleged Dallas cover-up expanded their research and widened the scope of their critique. Staking out this broader arena, the AIB noted in one of its position papers:

The discoveries set in motion around Watergate and the great aftershocks of Chile and Cointelpro have crystallized public awareness of the realities of power politics in the United States. We are at one of those moments when a providential convergence of events opens a window and shows us the treacheries involved in the struggle for state power. It is more possible today for masses of Americans to understand the need for a new framework of political thought which coherently situates these murders in an overall perspective on American politics during the Cold War. "Who killed JFK?" ought to be a leading slogan of the whole Bicentennial period.[44]

Some critics saw in the Watergate cover-up a reflection of the same explanations used to defend the commission's work a decade earlier. The refrain of concerns about national security and the sensitive operations of intelligence were once again raised to guarantee federal silence about possible government wrongdoing. Assassination theorists thus began to see their efforts against the wider backdrop of conspiracy and state-sanctioned criminality. Their public discussions began to include the deaths of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X and scrutinized the FBI's Cointelpro operations, the secret counterintelligence programs mounted to undermine the Black Panthers and the work of the New Left. Moreover, attention turned toward elaborating the perhaps conspiratorial interrelationships between covert government operations, foreign politicos, and organized crime. These investigations repeatedly revealed the joint involvement of CIA or former CIA operatives, former members of the Batista government ousted by Castro in Cuba, and figures prominent in the world of organized crime. What slowly emerged was a bureaucracy of criminals whose activities included foreign and domestic narcotics sales, campaign financing, money laundering (in Cuban exile–owned Florida banks through which funds for the Watergate break-in were funneled), and the attempted overthrow or assassination of foreign heads of state. The result, a criminal musical chairs with the same players—E. Howard Hunt, Frank Sturgis, Bebe Rebozo, Richard Nixon, and a score of top and second-echelon mob figures—with a twenty-year history of covert activity, led assassination critics to argue that the conspiracy and cover-up they identified with the Dallas killing was not some phantasmagoric exception to government affairs but conduct more like business as usual.

The House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) was established in September 1976 with a four-part prescription for investigation:

1. Who killed Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr.?
2. Was there evidence of a conspiracy in either assassination?
3. What was the performance of government agencies in protecting each man?