The assassination of President John F. Kennedy

David North
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Today marks the 60th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963.

Ten years ago, in an essay published on the *World Socialist Web Site* marking the half-century anniversary, I wrote:

> The United States is a country with many dark secrets. It may be the case that the American people will never know who killed Kennedy. But the deeper causes of his death can be explained. The assassination of Kennedy suddenly, in one terrible moment, confronted Americans with the unforeseen and explosive consequences of the interaction between the United States' malignant internal social contradictions and its reactionary and sinister post-World War II role as the world's leading imperialist power.

The events of the past decade have substantiated this assessment of the circumstances of the assassination and their political significance.

First, relating to the assassination itself, the official finding of the Warren Commission—that the murder of the president was the work of a "single lone gunman," Lee Harvey Oswald, and unrelated to any broader political conspiracy—remains as blatantly implausible today as it was a decade ago, let alone in the immediate aftermath of the assassination. The vast majority of the public remains convinced that Kennedy was the victim of a political conspiracy involving the Central Intelligence Agency and other high-level state actors.

The release of a new documentary, *JFK: What the Doctors Saw*, provides long-concealed information that further discredits the Warren Report. The documentary reveals that all the physicians, who attended to the mortally wounded president in Trauma Room One of Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas, identified the bullet hole in the front of Kennedy's neck as an entry wound. This unanimous conclusion by medical experts who treated the president flatly contradicts the Warren Commission's claim that all the bullets that struck Kennedy were fired from behind.

In its review of the documentary, the *New York Times*—which has defended the Warren Commission's findings against all critics since they were first published in 1964—does not challenge the doctors' testimony. The review concludes: "You will finish the film agreeing that what the doctors saw is crucial. But what it all means for America's most enduring mystery is less clear."

In fact, what "it all means" is blazingly clear: The doctors' eyewitness evaluation of President Kennedy's wounds decisively discredits the Warren Report. The bullets could not have come from only the Texas Book Depository Building, which was behind the president. At least one of the bullets struck the president from the front. At least two gunmen were involved. Therefore, Kennedy was the victim of a political conspiracy.

As for the deeper political significance of Kennedy's assassination, the events of the past decade have further substantiated the half-century appraisal of the event as an initial manifestation of the breakdown, under the pressure of interacting domestic and international contradictions, of American democracy.

During the years of his presidency, Kennedy sought with grandiloquent oratorical flourishes to conceal the growing crisis of the social and political foundations of American democracy. But even by 1963, as I noted a decade ago, "The chasm between the rhetorical invocations of democracy and the brutal reality of American policies became impossible to conceal, either internationally or within the United States."

The November 1963 assassination removed a president from office through a concealed conspiracy. By 2021, the breakdown of democracy had reached such a level that a coup d'etat, whose aim was the overthrow of the results of a national election, was organized by the president himself, with little effort at concealment. The murder of Kennedy in 1963 and Trump's attempted coup d'etat of 2021 are best understood as different stages in the crisis and breakdown of American democracy.

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A half-century since the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy

David North
22 November 2013

Fifty years ago today, on November 22, 1963, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States, was assassinated as his motorcade made its way through Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas. Unlike so many other clichéd phrases about American history, it is actually true that virtually no one who was old enough to be politically conscious would ever forget where they were when the news of the "three shots fired at the president's motorcade in Dallas" flashed across the United States and around the world. Even after a half-century, the traumatic events of that Friday afternoon and the days that followed remain vivid in the consciousness of countless millions of people.

The first question that arises on this anniversary is why the death of John F. Kennedy retains such a hold on the consciousness of the American people even after the passage of a half-century. He was not the first, but the fourth American president to be assassinated. Of course, the murder of Abraham Lincoln in April 1865 lives in the national consciousness, nearly 150 years after the event, as one of the most tragic and traumatic events in American history. But that is not hard to understand. Lincoln was, after all, America's greatest president—a rightfully beloved figure in world history who led the United States in a Civil War that put an end to slavery.

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Lincoln's place in the country's history is unique, and his assassination is an essential moment in the American experience.

The next two presidents to die at the hand of an assassin—James Garfield in 1881 and William McKinley in 1901—were mourned in their time and soon forgotten. Why, then, has the murder of Kennedy not faded from the national consciousness? One obvious reason is that Kennedy's death occurred in the age of television. The killing itself was captured on film, the murder of his alleged assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, was broadcast live on national TV, and the president's funeral was watched by virtually the entire country. The recorded images impart to the events of November 1963 an immediacy that seems almost timeless.

However, there are more significant reasons for the enduring political resonance of Kennedy's death. The most obvious is that the overwhelming majority of the American people have never accepted the official version of the assassination presented in the Warren Report: that the president's murder was the act of a lone gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald, who was not part of a broader political conspiracy.

Despite all the efforts of the media to discredit the critics of the Warren Report as "conspiracy theorists," the American people have rendered their verdict on the subject. The Warren Report has been seen, almost from the day of its publication in 1964, as a political cover-up. And that it certainly was. The report was commissioned by President Lyndon Johnson—who told his political confidants he believed Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy—to reassure a rightfully suspicious public.

The composition of the Warren Commission precluded any serious investigation into the assassination. Its members included such high level guardians of state secrets as former CIA director Allen Dulles (who had been fired by Kennedy in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs fiasco) and John J. McCloy, an old friend of Dulles, who was among the most influential and powerful of the "Wise Men" who directed American foreign policy following the Second World War. McCloy played a critical role in persuading Warren Commission members who doubted the single gunman theory to keep their dissenting opinions to themselves and go along with a unanimous finding that Lee Harvey Oswald had acted alone in the killing of the president.

One of the commission members, Congressman Hale Boggs, who was to become the House majority leader, subsequently acknowledged that he had doubts about the infamous "single bullet" theory (which asserted that the same bullet passed through both Kennedy and Texas Governor John Connally). Boggs was killed in October 1972 when his private plane apparently crashed in Alaska. Neither his body nor the plane was ever recovered.

The defenders of the Warren Commission have for decades used the term "conspiracy theory" as an epithet to discredit all evidence and arguments that suggest a *political cause* for the murder of an American president. Rather, the assassination had to be seen as a senseless and meaningless event, unrelated and unconnected to the condition of American society and politics. Under no circumstances could the assassination of the president be seen as the bloody outcome of conflict and crisis within the government, of something very sinister and rotten in the American state. That was the purpose of the official cover-up.

The United States is a country with many dark secrets. It may be the case that the American people will never know who killed Kennedy. But the deeper causes of his death can be explained. The assassination of Kennedy suddenly, in one terrible moment, confronted Americans with the unforeseen and explosive consequences of the interaction between the United States' malignant internal social contradictions and its reactionary and sinister post-World War II role as the world's leading imperialist power.

John F. Kennedy entered the White House in January 1961. Only 16 years had passed since the end of World War II. In August 1945, the Truman administration, anticipating the coming struggle with the Soviet Union, made the cold-blooded decision to drop atomic bombs on two Japanese cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to demonstrate the United States' omnipotence and ruthlessness. The atom bomb was an instrument of political rather than military necessity.

As the American historian Gabriel Jackson later wrote: "In the specific circumstances of August 1945, the use of the atom bomb showed that a psychologically very normal and democratically elected chief executive could use the weapon just as the Nazi dictator would have used it. In this way, the United States—for anyone concerned with moral distinctions in the conduct of different types of government—blurred the difference between fascism and democracy." [*Civilization and Barbarity in 20th-Century Europe* (New York: Humanity Books, 1999), pp. 176-77]

The United States emerged from the war as the dominant capitalist power in the world. Britain had been bankrupted by the war, and its long and humiliating retreat from its earlier imperialist glory was well underway and unstoppable. The attempt by the French bourgeoisie to hang on to its empire was heading toward disaster—first in Vietnam and, somewhat later, in Algeria. The American ruling class believed that its time had come. It believed that the combination of apparently limitless industrial power, the hegemonic role of the dollar in the new international monetary system, and sole possession of the atom bomb would guarantee its domination of the world for decades to come. In a burst of hubris, it even renamed the 1900s after itself—calling it the "American Century."

But by the time Kennedy was inaugurated, the course of post-war history had undermined both the illusions and self-confidence of the American ruling elite. The tide of popular anti-imperialist revolution had steadily grown over the previous 15 years. The Chinese Revolution had swept the pro-imperialist regime of Chiang Kai-shek from power. The dreams harbored by General MacArthur and other lunatics in the Pentagon and sections of the political establishment that the United States could achieve a military "rollback" of the Chinese government and even the Soviet government were shattered in the catastrophe of the Korean War. But the shift from "rollback" to "containment" did not alter the basic counterrevolutionary drive of American imperialism.

In place of a head-on military confrontation with the USSR and China, the anti-communist "containment" strategy involved the United States in an endless sequence of repressive anti-democratic and counterinsurgency operations aimed at propping up hated pro-American puppet regimes. Any foreign government in the world that was identified by the United States as harboring anti-imperialist, let alone socialistic, sympathies became eligible for destabilization and its leaders became targets for assassination.

Established by the Truman administration in 1947, the Central Intelligence Agency came into its own under Eisenhower in the 1950s. This was the decade of US-sponsored coups d'état—most infamously in Guatemala and Iran—and endless conspiracies against regimes that were seen to pose a threat to the global interests of the United States. What came to be called the "National Security State"—based on the alliance of powerful corporate interests, a massive military establishment, and an array of highly secret intelligence agencies—assumed dimensions incompatible with the maintenance of traditional forms of democracy within the United States. Just days before he left office, President Eisenhower—perhaps frightened at the monster whose growth he had abetted—delivered a televised "Farewell Address" in which he warned the American people that the growth of the "military-industrial complex" posed an immense danger to the survival of American democracy.

In his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, Kennedy sought to strike a tone of bold resolution. In the most grandiloquent passage, he proclaimed that the "torch had been passed to a new generation of Americans" who would be willing to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, and oppose any foe" to uphold the global interests of the United States. However, for all the soaring rhetoric, Kennedy's speech gave expression to the challenges confronting the ruling elite. In a more

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candid passage, he warned that if the United States "cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich."

Kennedy's speech was an attempt to reconcile in rhetoric the democratic pretensions of the United States—which had already been badly discredited in the eyes of the world by the repression of the McCarthy era and the ongoing and brutal denial of basic civil rights to African-Americans—with the imperatives of American imperialism. Such rhetorical exercises came to define the *public* face of the Kennedy administration.

But beneath the surface an uglier reality prevailed. Less than three months after his inauguration, Kennedy gave final approval for the launching of a counterrevolutionary invasion of Cuba by an anti-Castro army that had been created by the CIA. The new president received assurances that the invaders would be greeted as liberators when they landed in Cuba. The CIA knew that no such uprising was in the offing, but assumed that Kennedy, once the invasion had begun, would feel compelled to commit US forces to prevent the defeat of an American-sponsored operation. However, Kennedy, fearing Soviet retaliation in Berlin, refused to intervene to back the anti-Castro mercenaries. The invasion was defeated in less than 72 hours and more than 1,000 mercenaries were captured. The CIA never forgave Kennedy for this "betrayal."

While it is likely that Kennedy was chastened by the Bay of Pigs disaster—his anger over the false assurances given him by the CIA and US military was not a secret—the April 1961 defeat hardly ended Kennedy's commitment to counterinsurgency operations. His fascination—and that of his brother, Robert—with assassination plots, particularly against Castro, has been amply documented. Eventually, these plots required the recruitment of Mafia gangsters, drawing the Kennedy administration into self-destructive relations with the criminal underworld.

Within the United States, the social tensions that were to explode later in the 1960s were already apparent during the Kennedy administration. The determination of African-Americans to exercise their civil rights was met with violence by state governments that defied the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education ruling of the Supreme Court. Moreover, notwithstanding the relentless anti-communist propaganda of the state and media, which was enthusiastically abetted by the trade union bureaucracies, the working class continued to press for substantial improvements in living standards and social benefits. Kennedy, who cast himself as a representative of the tradition of New Deal reformism, advanced a legislative agenda that led, after his assassination, to the passage of the law establishing Medicare.

In the final year of his presidency, the political divisions within the ruling class over critical issues of international policy became more intense. Kennedy's decision to avoid an invasion of Cuba in the October 1962 missile crisis was opposed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Following the resolution of that harrowing crisis, which brought the United States and the USSR to the brink of nuclear war, Kennedy pursued and obtained passage of the nuclear test ban treaty.

These measures did not signify that Kennedy had abandoned a Cold War agenda. In fact, the last three months of his presidency were preoccupied with the intensifying crisis in Vietnam. Though it is not possible to determine what course Kennedy would have chosen in Vietnam had he lived, the historical record hardly supports claims that he favored the withdrawal of US forces. Kennedy authorized the overthrow of South Vietnamese President Diem, which resulted in the latter's murder on November 1, 1963. The purpose of the coup was to establish a new anti-communist regime that would wage war against the National Liberation Front more effectively than Diem. Three weeks later, Kennedy was murdered in Dallas.

The assassination of President Kennedy marked a critical inflection point in the modern history of the United States. In 1913, a half-century *before* Kennedy's death, Woodrow Wilson was inaugurated as the 28th president of the United States. It was during his administration that the United States, in 1917, entered the First World War, promising to "make the world safe for democracy." It was under the banner of Wilson's hypocritical invocation of a global democracy that the United States, for the first time, emerged as the principal imperialist power. That position was consolidated during the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-45), who sought to preserve a popular base for capitalism within the United States through the social reforms of the New Deal. These reforms enabled the Roosevelt administration to portray its intervention in the Second World War as a struggle for democracy against fascism.

The Kennedy administration brought that era to an end. Significantly, the Kennedy administration had come to office at precisely the point when economists began to take note of the first significant signs of the erosion of the global position of American capitalism. As first European and then Japanese capitalism recovered from the ravages of World War II, the economic supremacy of the United States was called into question. Just eight years after Kennedy's assassination, the dramatic shifts in the balance of international trade and payments brought about the collapse of the Bretton Woods system of dollar-gold convertibility. The United States had definitively entered an era of protracted decline.

John F. Kennedy was the last president who was able to link his administration, in the public mind, with the democratic traditions of the United States. But the political and moral foundations of his presidency had already been fatally eroded by the evolution of American imperialism. However sincere the democratic ideals and aspirations of the great mass of people, the United States had entered World War II to secure the global interests of American capitalism. In the years that followed the war, its policies assumed an ever more criminal character. The chasm between the rhetorical invocations of democracy and the brutal reality of American policies became impossible to conceal, either internationally or within the United States. Kennedy enthusiasts, especially after the president's death, referred to his administration as "Camelot." It could be better described as "a bright and shining lie."

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