

PROTECTIVE STUPIDITY IN ACTION: The HSCA and NEWSWEEK*

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[Editor's Note: *George Costello illustrates the use of "crimestop" journalism, which is designed to preclude the exercise of critical thinking about its subject matter, in NEWSWEEK's coverage of the 30th observance of the death of JFK, which has parallels with the work of the HSCA.]*

One of the most perceptive observations ever made about the Federal Government's reaction and the press's coverage of the assassination of President Kennedy was that of Raymond Marcus, quoting George Orwell's 1984:

The first and simplest stage of the discipline, which can be taught even to young children, is called, in Newspeak, CRIMESTOP. CRIMESTOP means the faculty of stopping short, as though by instinct, at the threshold of any dangerous thought. It includes the power of not grasping analogies, of failing to perceive logical errors, of misunderstanding the simplest arguments if they are inimical to Ingsoc [substitute the Establishment], and of being bored or repelled by any train of thought which is capable of leading in a heretical direction. CRIMESTOP, in short, means protective stupidity.¹

The Kennedy assassination is not the only area in which we have seen crimestop journalism, although it may well be the most important. The mainstream, Establishment press frequently takes official pronouncements at face value, and leaves it to those they disparage as scandal mongers, or "conspiracy theorists," to question the integrity and good faith of our leaders. Cases in point could include press handling of Iran Contra, of the "October Surprise," and even the recent coverage of the President's and FBI's post-September 11th assertions that they had been clueless about the possibility of terrorists flying planes into the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Thanks to some courageous FBI agents, we now know that FBI headquarters had ignored warnings that, properly pursued, might have led to apprehension of some of the terrorists. We know that President Bush, in a briefing, was warned that Osama Bin Laden was determined to bring his terrorism campaign to the United States.

Initially, there's a limited amount the press can do when the Government holds all the information and keeps it secret. But, as we have learned from the slow, painstaking process of probing behind the Kennedy assassination cover-up, much can be pieced together even if the Government refuses to cooperate, or obstructs citizen inquiry.

¹ Raymond Marcus, *Addendum B: Addendum to The HSCA, the Zapruder Film, and the Single Bullet Theory*, p.23. E. Martin Schotz draws the same analogy in *History Will Not Absolve Us*, pp. 4-5, *passim*.

And citizens could do a lot more if their healthy skepticism were shared by an aggressive and independent Establishment press. Based on press coverage of the Kennedy assassination, one might assume that there is not a free press in this country – that the Government owns and controls the media. We know this is not true in a formal or literal sense, and we see examples all the time of press independence and criticism of government.

There does, however, appear to be a consensus view of the legitimate bounds of media inquiry, and it's a view that assumes the good faith of our leaders and stifles dangerous or heretical inquiry. Caution is fine, and sound journalism demands verification of stories – especially those accusing government leaders of corruption or malfeasance. Sometimes, however, it's a matter of whether the media is willing to devote the resources necessary to prove or disprove allegations. When push comes to shove, protective stupidity may take hold, and provide a cover for looking the other way. Just when we most need an aggressive, skeptical, and independent press, it seems as if we lose it, and the press (the Establishment press, at least) joins with government leaders in circling the wagons. We can argue about how often this crimestop phenomenon happens. Clearly, however, it happened with the Kennedy assassination cover-up.

The story of media complicity in the Kennedy assassination cover-up really began immediately after the assassination. A critical step occurred when President Lyndon Johnson scared Chief Justice Earl Warren into heading up what became known as the Warren Commission. Johnson told Warren that there may have been foreign involvement, and that if things were not handled properly and word got out that the Soviets or Cubans were behind the assassination, we could be propelled into a nuclear war that could kill 40 million Americans. As we've heard many times, Warren left his meeting with Johnson with tears in his eyes.

And the mainstream press fell into lockstep, not exposing the cover-up, but instead protecting us from information it feared was too dangerous for us to know. Could it be that a few of the major editors got the same message from Johnson or his spokesmen that Earl Warren got -- that the lives of millions of Americans depended on their cooperation in not probing behind the official accounts of the assassination, and indeed depended on their praising the Warren Commission for its thoroughness?

The press -- or at least the mainstream press -- always feels a responsibility not to endanger the national security. This is understandable, and desirable. The issue is always where to draw the line, and how trusting to be when government asserts that the national security is at stake. Initially, at least, it must have seemed like an easy call. What editor would want to publish information that could get us into a nuclear war? But that was 38 years ago, and the press has yet to emerge from the protective stupidity cocoon that envelops the Kennedy case.

The special issue of *Newsweek* dated November 22, 1993, coinciding with the 30th anniversary of the assassination, provided a prime example of protective stupidity. The

facts clearly indicated that there was a cover-up, *Newsweek* admitted, but the cover-up was “benign.” The feature story was entitled “The JFK Cover-up: It’s Not What You Think.” It was an admitted attempt to counter Oliver Stone’s movie *JFK*, and relied heavily on Gerald Posner’s “analysis” from his book *Case Closed*. “The Real Cover-up,” according to *Newsweek*, resulted from two benign efforts: a misguided attempt to head off wild speculation about a communist conspiracy that could lead “a hysterical public” to demand revenge (a variation on the nuclear war scare that worked so well with Earl Warren), and, in addition, the following bureaucratic “cover your ass” actions:

- The CIA had to cover up the fact that on the day of the assassination its agents had delivered a poison pen to a would-be Castro assassin.
- J. Edgar Hoover had to conceal the fact that James Hosty, one of his agents, had received a threatening note from Oswald two weeks before the assassination, and that the FBI had destroyed the note.
- An inept autopsy had to be explained. (We now know that the Kennedy autopsy was not just inept, but fraudulent.) The autopsy wasn’t thorough, according to *Newsweek*, because Bobby Kennedy had asked that the President’s Addison’s Disease not be revealed. Think about this one. Are we to believe that concern about Addison’s Disease, manifested by a shrinkage of the adrenal glands, located near the kidneys, explains why the autopsists did not dissect and trace a high back wound, and did not identify a throat wound that they later hypothesized must have been the exit point for the bullet that struck the back?

Another example of protective stupidity was provided by *Newsweek*’s attempted debunking of various conspiracy theories. *Newsweek* listed, among others, the theory that the CIA did it, and the theory that anti-Castro Cuban exiles did it. Under the column “What’s the Hitch,” these two possibilities were dismissed for the following reasons:

- The CIA couldn’t have done it because “Oswald was no hit man, and making him a patsy would have taken great logistical legerdemain. Then how to silence the real hit persons? Hit them?” --- Well, *why not?* That’s standard operating procedure for the Mafia, isn’t it? The CIA was working with the Mafia to assassinate Castro, wasn’t it? Jack Ruby “hit” Oswald, didn’t he? And as for Oswald the patsy, whom would the CIA have preferred as a patsy – someone who could be dismissed as a commie lone nut, or a trained hit man who could be traced to the Mafia, the military, or the CIA itself?
- Then *Newsweek* says the anti-Castro Cubans couldn’t have done it. “Would Cuban exiles have trusted the Anglo commie Oswald? Or, if he was a patsy, could they have set up this more elaborate plot unhelped and undetected?” -- Well, *who says they were unhelped and undetected?*

Couldn't the CIA have helped them? The CIA was arming and training Cuban exiles, wasn't it?

And so on. You get the drift. When it could no longer be denied that there was a cover-up, it had to be made to appear to have been a *benign* cover-up. In the whodunit category, plausible possibilities had to be made to look implausible. The simplest arguments had to be misunderstood or distorted. Trains of thought that could lead in dangerous directions were repelled with simplistic -- and transparently unsatisfactory -- explanations.

How transparently unsatisfactory an explanation is, of course, depends to a large degree on what the reader knows. *Newsweek's* breezy treatment played on the curiosity of its readers. But it depended for its success on the ignorance and laziness of its readers. Someone with knowledge about the Kennedy assassination, and about CIA-Mafia-Cuban exile operations, can easily see through the baloney. People without that background -- and without a skeptical mind -- would be more likely to give *Newsweek* and its purported "expert" Gerald Posner the benefit of the doubt.

Creating doubt was really all *Newsweek* had to do. It was O.K. if people were not completely convinced that *Newsweek* and Posner had "closed" the case, as long as they believed that there are still respectable arguments supporting the lone gunman theory. If the experts disagree, then we can just throw up our hands and say "oh well, we'll never know the truth about what really happened." As E. Martin Schotz and Gaeton Fonzi have observed, *knowledge* about what happened is dangerous, because it demands response. Belief not based on knowledge or reasonable certainty, on the other hand, excuses inaction.²

It's not just the White House and the press that set the tone and establish the bounds of public discourse. Congress also plays an important role in controlling the public agenda and shaping the conventional wisdom. We've seen several examples of this in congressional investigations relating to the assassination.

In the mid-70's, before formation of the HSCA, the Church Committee (as well as the more-or-less parallel House investigation chaired by Otis Pike) uncovered a lot of the CIA's misdeeds, including assassinations of foreign leaders. A subcommittee chaired by Richard Schweiker probed the performances of the FBI and the CIA in investigating the assassination, and came up with some interesting leads. But the press, prompted by the Ford Administration and its allies, helped cut the investigations short before the full story could be learned.

The tide turned in 1975 following the assassination in Athens of a CIA station chief whose identity had been publicly revealed. The congressional investigators had nothing to do with this, but the Ford Administration and its allies in Congress and the press cleverly played the situation for all it was worth, insinuating that the congressional

² E. Martin Schotz, *History Will Not Absolve Us*, pp. xi, 11; Gaeton Fonzi, *The Last Investigation*, pp. 410-11 (quoting Schotz).

investigations were to blame, and arguing that the investigations were endangering national security.³

But it's the House Select Committee on Assassinations that most vividly illustrates protective stupidity. The Committee was on shaky ground from the outset, and had to scratch, compromise, and scale down in order to stay afloat with minimal funding. Gaeton Fonzi chronicled the Committee's travails in his excellent book *The Last Investigation*.

The Committee's decision to close up shop in spite of explosive new evidence pointing to conspiracy wins the prize, but that action was consistent with the Committee's whole scaled-back approach after its first staff director, Richard Sprague, was forced out.

When Sprague indicated that he intended to treat the Kennedy assassination as a murder investigation and go wherever the evidence led him -- even into the CIA if the trail took him there -- all hell broke loose, and he was forced out. The uproar wasn't just in Congress and the White House, but was coordinated with editorials and op ed pieces in the Establishment press, attacking Sprague for his grandiose plans and claiming that he would abuse civil liberties by employing lie detectors. The key word here is coordinated -- the press answered the call, and served the purposes of those who wanted to prevent Sprague from launching a no-holds-barred investigation.⁴

Sprague was replaced as staff director by G. Robert Blakey, who entered into an agreement with the CIA -- an agreement that Sprague had refused to sign -- to allow Committee staff access to CIA files in exchange for allowing the CIA to censor what the Committee could make public. "How can I possibly sign [such] an agreement with an agency I'm supposed to be investigating," Sprague had asked.⁵

An unfunny thing happened on the way to the Committee's final report. The Committee was nearly done with its work and about to ratify the Warren Commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald did it all by himself, shooting from above and behind the President's limousine from the "sniper's nest" in the 'Texas School Book Depository, when newly discovered acoustics evidence showed that there had been a second gunman shooting from the front of the President's limousine. The microphone of one of the motorcycle policemen in the motorcade had been stuck in the open position, and apparently had recorded the sounds of the assassination. Experts testified that there was a 95% probability that the recorded sounds were the gunshots of the assassination, and that one of the shots was fired from behind the picket fence on the "grassy knoll" to the right front of the limousine. This was, to say the least, a dramatic and important

³ There's an excellent account of this in *Challenging the Secret Government: The Post-Watergate Investigations of the CIA and FBI*, by Kathryn Olmsted, University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

⁴ For additional background, see John Williams' interviews with Sprague, printed in *Probe*, vol. 7, nos. 2 and 3 (January-February and March-April 2000, respectively).

⁵ As quoted in Fonzi, *The Last Investigation*, p. 197.

discovery. There was 95% certainty that the Warren Commission's lone gunman theory was wrong, and that there had been a second gunman.

So what did the Committee do? It revised its report somewhat to reflect the acoustics evidence, but went ahead and completed the report and closed up shop. The Committee said, in effect: "Well yes, there was a conspiracy, but the second shooter missed, and besides, we don't really want to know who was involved, now do we?" Incredible! At the last minute, new evidence proves to a 95% certainty that there really was a second gunman after all, but they go ahead and shut down the committee and issue a report without trying to pursue it further and find out who was involved.

Why wasn't there an uproar? Why didn't Committee members go back to the House – go public if necessary -- and ask for and *demand* an extension, with adequate funding, so that the Committee could actually investigate who was behind the newly revealed conspiracy? Why didn't the Establishment press do the same, and try to bring the pressure of public opinion to bear on Congress?

Well, maybe it's because the possibilities made people uncomfortable, and actually uncovering the truth was incompatible with the short-term, politically driven, conventional wisdom.

We know that there was pressure on the Committee to finish up its work and issue a report without spending a whole lot of money. The Committee actually ended its existence in December 1978 at the end of the 95th Congress, and staff Director G. Robert Blakey and a skeleton staff stayed on in the Speaker's Office to write the report during the next Congress. This course of action – indeed, the Committee's *modus operandi* -- can only be explained by a studied and "protective stupidity" that must have gone something like this:

"We're all honorable men here (including the CIA and the FBI), and we have a gentlemen's agreement that we're not going to nose around and expose each other's dirty laundry. So if, by mistake, we get too close, we draw back and pretend we didn't see anything important."

Gaeton Fonzi actually explained it in almost these terms in *The Last Investigation*. Referring to his own conclusion, based on his investigatory work for the Committee, that the CIA's David Atlee Phillips was actually the "Maurice Bishop" who had overseen operations of Alpha 66 and also met with Oswald, Fonzi asks:

"How could the Committee reach such a conclusion without calling for a deeper and more forceful investigation of the CIA?"⁶

Well, the Committee solved that problem by fudging, saying that "no definite conclusion" could be drawn as to the identity of Maurice Bishop.

⁶ *The Last Investigation*, p. 398.

As Fonzi summarizes this:

“Any other conclusion would have opened doors that the Committee did not want to open; would have questioned the validity of the Committee’s entire relationship with the CIA; would have raised ominous doubts about the worth of the Agency’s promise to cooperate with the Committee; would have made suspect the Agency’s veracity in responding to questions, in making documents available and in providing access to all its files; and would have challenged the Agency’s claim of having had no association with Lee Harvey Oswald and no knowledge of the circumstances of Kennedy’s assassination.”⁷

Powerful stuff. But it’s a perfect example of crimestop -- protective stupidity. And Fonzi wasn’t even talking about the Committee’s final decision to end its work on schedule even though the new acoustics evidence brought most of its conclusions into question.

Now that David Mantik, Gary Aguilar, Doug Horne, and Jim Fetzer have shown that the Kennedy autopsy was fraudulent,⁸ now would be a good time for the press – and the Government itself – to begin to set the record straight. In fact, this and other new information could provide protective *cover* for the media and the Government to abandon their long history of protective *stupidity* regarding the assassination of President Kennedy.

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⁷ *The Last Investigation*, p. 400.

⁸ See James Fetzer, ed., *Murder in Dealey Plaza: What We Know Now That We Didn’t Know Then*. Catfeet Press (2000).