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Who Killed Kennedy? One Man's Answer

By EDWARD WYATT

The prosecutor who put Charles Manson behind bars now wants to solve another crime -- a really simple one, he insists. So simple that it takes only 1,612 pages to prove his case.

Vincent Bugliosi, whose prosecution of Charles Manson in 1970 led him to write one of the best-selling true-crime books of all time, "Helter Skelter," has now turned his attention to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

And that is his full attention: 20 years of research, more than one million words, hundreds of interviews, thousands of documents and more than 10,000 citations. The result, "Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy" (W. W. Norton), is due out tomorrow. His conclusion: Lee Harvey Oswald killed Kennedy, and acted alone.

Why would such a simple conclusion require so much argument?

"Because of the unceasing and fanatical obsession of thousands of researchers over the last 43 years, from around the world but mostly in the United States," Mr. Bugliosi said in an interview at the cafe of the Sportsmen's Lodge Hotel in Studio City, Calif. "Examining under a high-powered microscope every comma, every period, every detail on every conceivable issue, and making hundreds and hundreds of allegations, they have transformed this simple case into its present form."

Mr. Bugliosi likes to tell a story illustrating why he believes this book is necessary. In 1992, less than a year after the debut of Oliver Stone's conspiracy-minded film "J.F.K.," Mr. Bugliosi was addressing a group of trial lawyers when a member of the audience asked him about the assassination.

Mr. Bugliosi asked for a show of hands of how many people did not accept the findings of the Warren Commission, which had investigated the assassination and concluded that Oswald was the killer. Close to 90 percent of the 600 lawyers raised their hands, he recalled. Then he asked how many had seen "J.F.K." or read an account that argued in favor of a conspiracy; a similar number raised their hands. Finally, he asked how many had read the Warren Commission report. Only a smattering of hands went up.

"The first national poll that came out shortly after the assassination showed the majority of Americans accepted the Warren Commission," he said. "But all people have seen throughout the years is one book after another propounding the conspiracy theory. It has penetrated the consciousness of the American people and convinced them that the Warren Commission's a big joke, and that Oswald was either innocent or just some patsy who was framed by some exotic group of conspirators, ranging from anti-Catholic Cuban exiles to organized crime working in league with U.S. intelligence. And the majority of Americans now, 75 percent, believe there was a conspiracy."

Prominent proponents of alternative assassination theories are already prepared to dispute Mr. Bugliosi's conclusions. Mr. Stone, for example, said that most Americans believed the assassination was more than the work of Oswald alone "from the very beginning."

"President Johnson didn't believe the Warren Commission; nor did Robert Kennedy, as David Talbot's new book 'Brothers' shows," Mr. Stone said in an e-mail message. "In 1979, the House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations determined that President Kennedy 'was probably assassinated as the result of a conspiracy.' The Warren Commission, deservedly, has not stood the test of time."

But Mr. Bugliosi maintains that the American public has been conned into believing Oswald was framed, and that among the victims is Oswald's widow, Marina, whom Mr. Bugliosi interviewed in 2000. After telling the Warren Commission that she believed her husband was guilty, she has slowly changed her story over the years.

"She's never changed the facts upon which her initial conclusions were based," Mr. Bugliosi said. And, he added, he is convinced that the tempestuous nature of Lee and Marina Oswald's relationship played a part in the murder. The night before the assassination, Mr. Bugliosi writes, Oswald, then separated from his wife, visited her and asked her to come back to him, which she refused to do.

In 1986, Mr. Bugliosi participated in a mock trial of Lee Harvey Oswald in London, produced by a British television company. Acting as prosecutor, he faced off against Gerry Spence, the famed defense lawyer. The case was tried before a jury of Americans who were flown over for the event. The jury found Oswald guilty.

That experience led Mr. Bugliosi deeper into the assassination files. In addition to the Warren Commission report, he scoured the files of the House committee on assassinations and dug into reams of other documents in the National Archives. He conducted scores of interviews. In addition to his 1,612-page book, he compiled nearly 1,000 pages of endnotes, which are included on a CD-ROM.

"No one was thinking in terms of a book like this coming out and laying all questions to rest," he said. "Even questions that people wouldn't dream about, I think, are answered in this book. It's the only book that covers the entire case."

Of course, other books have reached the same conclusion, including Gerald Posner's "Case Closed" in 1993. While Mr. Bugliosi called that book a "valuable contribution" to the assassination literature, he criticized Mr. Posner's methods, accusing him of taking quotations out of context and omitting contrary evidence.

At 72, Mr. Bugliosi is anything but retiring. Though he has lived most of his life in Southern California, he retains traces of the Midwestern accent that betrays his early years in Hibbing, Minn. He has been married for 52 years. With deep blue eyes, close-cropped gray hair and an inevitable desert tan, he looks a bit like Henry Fonda.

As a deputy district attorney in Los Angeles, he tried more than 100 cases, winning nearly all of them. That experience, he said, gives him a unique ability to address a case as sprawling as the Kennedy assassination.

"The assassination literature is so vast that people spend years of their lives just concentrating on one little aspect of it: Oswald, Ruby, the Warren Commission, Jim Garrison's prosecution of Clay Shaw in

New Orleans, the C.I.A., the mob," he said. "I took on the whole thing here."

The Warren Commission, for example, did not deal with the issue of acoustics. Mr. Bugliosi addressed that in a 65-page endnote, which itself has dozens of footnotes. The House committee, he added, did not deal with all the conspiracy issues.

The effort, Mr. Bugliosi said, has taken a toll. "One thing about this case is that there's no bottom to the pile," he said. "I hope I'm wrong, but I feel that the book has taken a physical toll on me, and I've always been someone who can tolerate a tremendous amount of work."

Part of the physical toll might be traced to the fact that all of those million-plus words were written in longhand on a yellow legal pad, and then typed up by a secretary.

Mr. Bugliosi said he did not expect anyone to sit down and read the book from beginning to end. The way it is broken into sections makes it an easily accessible reference book (albeit one that is priced at \$49.95). "If you're reading about the Zapruder film, that has nothing to do with the autopsy," he explained.

And if anybody does read the whole thing, Mr. Bugliosi said, one conclusion will be inescapable. "It's my view that it's impossible for any reasonable, rational person to read this book without being satisfied beyond all reasonable doubt that Oswald killed Kennedy and acted alone," he said.

Mr. Bugliosi says he does not believe he will convince all the conspiracy-minded people out there. But as for the 75 percent who believe there was more to it than Oswald, he said, "I think we're going to knock it down substantially."