

## Gerald Posner Takes Aim at "Crossfire"

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Gerald Posner, in his book *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK*, takes "conspiracy theorist" Jim Marrs to task for several factual errors that appear in Marrs' own book about the assassination, *Crossfire*. I would like to delineate some of the more glaring inconsistencies between the assertions Marrs makes and the evidence that Posner was able to uncover.

To begin with, Jim Marrs pays little attention to Oswald's youth, stating that "despite much conjecture, there is little evidence that Lee's childhood was any better or any worse than others." (Marrs 92) Yet Gerald Posner unearthed highly pertinent information regarding Oswald's formative years. Among this information is the fact that Oswald's father, Robert Edward Lee Oswald, died two months before Lee was born (on October 18, 1939), and thus Lee never received the paternal guidance so crucial to the emotional development of a young boy. Lee's relationship with his mother during childhood, and later, adolescence, would have an equally deleterious effect his emotional maturity. Marguerite Oswald was described by her other son Robert as extremely temperamental and difficult to deal with; she often attempted to "dominate" and "control" her children. Her relationship with Lee alternated between neglect (which "left a far mean streak of independence," according to an autobiographical manuscript Lee would later write) and almost pathological obsession. Rather than encourage her son to attend school regularly -- which was difficult in any case because Marguerite was constantly moving her family from one place to the next -- Oswald's mother instead told him that he was brighter and better than any of his contemporaries. Marguerite "trained Lee to stay in the house," whether she was there or not, her sister Lillian later recalled. (Posner 9) As a result, Lee spent almost all of his time inside the home, alone, reading books.

Because Marguerite frequently allowed Lee to have his own way about almost everything -- a neighbor said that she "spoiled him to death" -- Lee was an unruly, unmanageable child. Another

neighbor of the Oswald's, Hiram Conway, recalls that Lee exhibited decidedly antisocial attitudes and behavior. On the way home from school, where he had become a bully, Conway observed that Lee often carried stones, searching for other children to throw them at. "He was... vicious... He was a bad kid." (Posner 9) Later, when the Oswald's moved to the Bronx, Lee was so frequently truant from school that a judge remanded him to "Youth House," a juvenile facility, for three weeks of psychiatric evaluation. (Posner 11) While Marrs claims that the results of these tests were "essentially inconclusive," Posner quotes Dr. Renatus Hartogs, the clinical psychologist who administered them, as concluding that Lee Oswald suffered from a "personality pattern disturbance with schizoid features and passive-aggressive tendencies." Hartog went on to say, " Lee (is a) ... emotionally quite disturbed youngster, who suffers (from)... emotional isolation and deprivation, lack of affection, absence of family life and rejection by a self-involved and conflicted mother." (Posner 13) Although he did not explicitly state that Lee was potentially violent and dangerous to society (because to do so would have meant institutionalization for the youth), Hartog nonetheless felt that eventuality quite possible.

Another aspect of Oswald's youth that Jim Marrs ignores in *Crossfire* was Lee's early and steadily growing interest in guns. Ever more belligerent, Lee was involved in countless fights by the time he reached Beauregard junior high school, in New Orleans (Marguerite had fled New York to avoid the certain placement of Lee in a home for disturbed boys). A classmate, Edward Voebel, remembers that Oswald carried a plastic model of a .45 caliber pistol around, and later decided that, since he wanted a real .45, he would steal one. Oswald persuaded Voebel to help him "case " a gun shop, and even produced a glass-cutter to remove the shop's window. (Posner 16)

Marrs plays down Oswald's teenage interest in Communist political doctrine, contending that, if anything, Oswald's flaunting of Marxist philosophy while in the Marines, and his subsequent defection to the Soviet Union (in October of 1959), proved that Lee was a U.S. intelligence operative acting as a "double-agent." (Marrs 189-196) Yet Marrs either failed to note or did not know of another Beauregard junior high classmate of Oswald's, William Wulf, who recalls that Oswald was

keenly interested in Marxism, and engaged Wulf in animated conversation about the subject.

Oswald, Wulf relates, said that "communism was the only way of life for the worker... and that he was looking for a Communist cell in town to join but he couldn't find any... (Oswald was a) self-made communist... his beliefs seemed to be warped but strong. He impressed me as a boy who could get violent over communism." (Posner 16)

Later, after dropping out of Warren Easton High, his eleventh school, Oswald got a job as a messenger at the Pfisterer Dental Laboratory. There he met Palmer McBride, and during their first real conversation, McBride commented that Dwight D. Eisenhower, then president, "was doing a pretty good job." Oswald retorted that Ike was "exploiting the working people." Lee also said that, given the opportunity, he would kill Eisenhower. (Posner 17) McBride remembers that Oswald habitually praised Nikita Khrushchev and "seemed quite proud" to possess copies of both *Das Kapital* and the *Communist Manifesto*. (Posner 18)

After Marguerite and Lee moved to Fort Worth, Texas -- the twenty-first such move of Lee's young life -- Oswald would buy his first firearm, a Marlin bolt-action .22 caliber rifle. After dropping out of yet another high school, Lee, at sixteen, would write to the Socialist Party of America, pronouncing himself a "Marxist who has been studying Socialist principles for well over fifteen months" and requesting information about how to join the SPA's "youth league." (Posner 18-19)

Marrs does not include any of these facts in *Crossfire*; to do so would weaken his argument that Lee Harvey Oswald had a relatively normal childhood and adolescence. Whatever else may be said about Oswald, his formative and teenage years were hardly "normal."

As for the assassination itself, Jim Marrs states in his book that "most of the witnesses in the crowd (at Dealey Plaza) believed shots came from the Grassy Knoll." (Marrs 39) However, Gerald Posner demonstrates that when the House Select Committee on Assassinations reviewed more than 178 of the statements given by witnesses, 44% could not be certain where the shots came from; the largest number-- 28% -- thought the shots came from the Texas Schoolbook Depository; only 14% believed the shots that killed President Kennedy came from the Grassy Knoll (17% felt the shots

emanated from various other areas. Posner adds that, "significantly, only four witnesses, two percent, thought (the shots) came from more than one location." (Posner 235)

Posner points out that three co-workers of Oswald's, Bonnie Ray Williams, Junior Jarman, and Harold Norman, had gathered to watch the presidential motorcade pass by the Depository on the southeast corner of the fifth floor, one level below the area later designated as the "sniper's nest." Because the flooring was being replaced on the sixth story, only a thin plywood covering separated the two floors. Noise originating from either floor was therefore easily audible. As the three men watched the president's motorcade proceed onto Elm Street, they heard the first shot. Said Bonnie Ray Williams: "(the shots were) loud... (it) sounded like it was right in the building... it even shook the building, the side we were on. Cement fell on my head." Harold Norman, directly below the "sniper's nest," would recall that, when he heard the first shot, "I heard boom, then click-click, boom, click-click, boom. I could hear the sound of the click (i.e. the bolt-action from Oswald's Mannlicher-Carcano rifle), I could hear the sound of the shells hitting the floor, I could hear everything. Three shots. No doubt in my mind." (Posner 241) Jim Marrs, in *Crossfire*, refuses to connect Oswald with this testimony, writing that while there may have been an assassin shooting three bullets from the sixth floor of the Texas Schoolbook Depository, it was not necessarily Lee Harvey Oswald. Although these witness accounts suggest a link with Oswald because he was employed on the sixth floor of the Depository, I think Marrs has a point; the shooter obviously could have been Oswald, but since neither Williams, Jarman, or Norman actually *saw* Oswald pull the trigger, we can never be absolutely sure.

Less commendable is Marrs manipulation of eye-witness Jesse Price's testimony in service of a "second gunman" theory. In an affidavit signed on November 22nd, Price wrote that "the cars had proceeded West on Elm and was (sic) just a short distance from the Tripple (sic) underpass, when I saw Gov. Connelly (sic) slump over." Yet in *Crossfire*, Marrs, in reference to the affidavit, states that "while sitting on the edge of the (Union Terminal Annex's) roof, overlooking the plaza, Price heard shots '... from by the... Triple Underpass.'" Marrs also alleges that Price saw a young man "with a

white dress shirt, no tie, and khaki-colored pants" running toward the passenger cars on the railroad tracks (behind the Grassy Knoll) after the shots were fired. Marris maintains that Price told authorities that he saw something in the man's hand, "which could have been a gun." (Marris 39) However, as Posner shows, in his affidavit, Price actually said, "he had something in his hand. I couldn't be sure but it may have been a head piece (meaning a hat)." Most damning of all, Marris quotes Price as saying that he heard many shots, "I think five and then much later... another one." The essential portion of this statement, which was originally situated between the ellipsis Marris employed when reproducing it, was, "maybe as much as five minutes later." That is, Price said in his affidavit that he heard a volley of perhaps five shots, and then, *five minutes later*, heard another one. Posner suggests that since no one else heard another shot five minutes after Kennedy was hit, Price's statement was dubious. I would agree. The fact that Marris expunged such a critical part of Price's testimony to obscure that possibility is inexcusable.

Posner succeeds in deflating Marris attempts to read conspiracy into the presence of the "umbrella man" and the "babushka lady." In *Crossfire*, Marris states that a man, standing near the street-side of the Stemmons Freeway, held a black umbrella open as the assassination took place, yet notes that the umbrella was closed both before and after the shots that killed Kennedy were fired. Marris then speculates that "the umbrella man" may have fired paralyzing darts at JFK to "soften him up," allowing a professional marksman to take comfortable aim at an immobilized target. Marris also opines that the man with the umbrella may have been providing visual signals to "the shooters" by alternately opening and closing his umbrella. Although he later identifies the umbrella man as Louis Steven Witt, a man who in 1978 agreed to testify before the HSCA about his "role" in the assassination, Marris rejects Witt's claim that opening a black umbrella on a sunny day was his way of heckling Kennedy. Witt's explanation was "facile," "improbable," and "bizarre." On top of that, "conspiracy researcher" Penn Jones, who initially interviewed Witt, believed that the man's answers were "coached." This is enough for Marris to dismiss Witt as untrustworthy. (Marris 29-33)

Similarly, Marrs cites the "babushka lady" -- a lady standing across the street from Witt wearing a kerchief tied over her head -- as someone with an "explosive story" to tell. She can be seen in several still photos taken in Dealey Plaza during the assassination. Marrs writes that Beverly Oliver, a born-again Christian, came forward in 1970 to reveal that she was the woman in the photographs. In doing so, Oliver made some very interesting claims: that film she'd taken of the assassination had been confiscated and never returned by the FBI; that she was a friend of Jack Ruby, and that Ruby had introduced her to "Lee Harvey Oswald of the CIA;" she "knew" (Marrs word) that Ruby, Oswald and David Ferrie were "closely associated;" and she married a Dallas underworld figure closely connected to Ruby who, in 1968, introduced her to Richard Nixon, then running for president for the second time. (Marrs 36-37)

Gerald Posner, however, casts doubt on whether Beverly Oliver was even in Dealey Plaza on the 22nd of November, 1963. He notes that Oliver's story has changed a number of times, and that the camera she claimed to be using during the assassination did not exist in 1963. Although the House Select Committee on Assassinations interviewed Oliver in executive session, it decided not to use her as a witness. (Posner 259) This decision does not mean that Oliver's sensational charges are completely without merit; the problem for Marrs, however, is that they have yet to be independently substantiated. For example, Oliver at one point claims that an unidentified female friend also knew about Oswald's visits to Jack Ruby's strip club, and did not hide this fact. Yet, according to Oliver, her friend subsequently disappeared, whereupon she "decided it would be in (my) best interest not to say anything." To my mind, it is Beverly Oliver's story that seems "facile," "improbable," and "bizarre:" no one has stepped forward to corroborate her tale, and the unnamed friend who could do so has conveniently disappeared (if indeed she ever existed).

Finally, Posner shows that the "mystery deaths" of witnesses related to the assassination of JFK detailed in *Crossfire* are less suspicious than they seem at first glance. Posner writes that Marrs' total of 103 deaths was extracted from a list of more than 10,000 people who were connected to the assassination in any way. (Posner 482) Posner also makes the eminently sensible point that

none of the major investigators or critics involved with the JFK case have yet died an unusual or suspect death. All of the early critics, even those who sought to implicate the FBI, CIA, Secret Service, LBJ, et. al. in a massive government conspiracy to remove Kennedy from power, are alive and apparently well. Nor have any of the key witnesses claiming a second gunman at Dealey Plaza -- Jean Hill, Malcolm Summers, Gordon Arnold, etc. -- been harmed. Witnesses purporting to have dangerous knowledge about a possible conspiracy, from Beverly Oliver, to Delphine Roberts (who linked Oswald to Ferrie and Guy Banister) are likewise still very much alive. (Posner 482) Posner's research reveals that half of the 103 witnesses who *did* die, 53 actually died of natural causes. Fifty-one of the 103 did not die until the 1970's. (Posner believes that the number is closer to 101, by the way, writing that Marrs attributed two names to one person -- Teresa Norton -- who may still be alive) Since Posner reasons that the conspirators would want to dispose of unwanted witnesses as soon as possible, it does not make sense to him that they would wait ten years to complete the job. More than 60% of the post-seventies witnesses died of natural causes. Only 14 of the 103 died within a year of the assassination. (Posner 483)

There will always be room for doubt about the assassination of John F. Kennedy -- at least for me. In my opinion, Lee Harvey Oswald probably pulled the trigger that killed the president, and he probably acted alone. Yet I would add that while the CIA and their ilk may not have been involved in some nebulous "plot" to rid themselves of a troublesome nuisance, it's my belief that they were fully capable of doing so. One can argue that the CIA did not have a particularly impressive track-record when it came to plotting coups. True enough, but even today we know so little about that agency's activities (never mind the NSA and all the other "national security" spooks running around playing James Bond) that it is impossible to say with any real certainty what they have done and what they have not done. The CIA and similar elements of the "shadow government" -- for that is how such organizations must be defined when they are literally accountable to no one -- may or may not have had a compelling motive to murder a president, but it can be argued that they had the means, and the opportunity.

Although he refutes Marrs' allegations with aplomb, Posner's analysis nonetheless presents problems of its own. To accept the statements, evidence, and records provided by the FBI, CIA, Dallas Police Department, and others at face value, as Posner does throughout his book, seems to beg the obvious question: is it remotely possible that they may be lying, or that the "evidence" and "records" they provide are bogus? Is it possible that, were there to be a conspiracy involving these same authorities, they might, conceivably, destroy all evidence implicating them?

That is a question Gerald Posner never seriously addresses. Nor does he help himself by indulging in manipulative writing techniques and gratuitous cheap shots: when witnesses that buttress his arguments are introduced, they are invariably described as solid citizens whose testimony is always accurate and uniformly unimpeachable. Yet Posner does not grant the same leeway to those who fail, for whatever reason, to support his thesis; they are either people of dubious character looking to work some kind of self-serving angle -- religious nuts like Delphine Roberts or dope-addled prostitutes like Rose Chermie -- or they have an overactive imagination, or they are "confused." Because David Lifton (no saint he) used eyewitness testimony from "bit players at Bethesda -- orderlies, technicians, and casket carriers" to prove his theory that Kennedy's body had been altered between Dallas and Washington, D.C., the fact that these "bit players" were faceless underlings discounts anything they might say. (Posner 295)

Posner does not hesitate, either, to repeat hearsay or unflattering rumor when it suits his purposes, whether used to discredit Jim Garrison as a possible pedophile (Posner 436n), or a Parkland doctor who disagreed with the medical pronouncements rendered by his colleagues regarding the wounds on the president's body (Posner 312) Posner employs this approach all too often in *Case Closed*, and regardless of the veracity of the charges, such tactics ultimately undermine his credibility. Even so, I think every "conspiracy buff" (including Jim Marrs) should read Posner's book, because it contains much legitimate information, and that's what we're all after, isn't it?