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A More Perfect Union: The Origins and Developments of the U.S. Constitution

Paper # 3

In *Case Closed*, Gerald Posner explores the events surrounding one of the most controversial and influential events in the history of the United States: the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Posner sets out to debunk the myths and answer all of the questions that the American public has had since that unforgettable day in Dallas in November 1963. His main focus throughout the book is to convince the reader that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in killing the president and that any talk of conspiracy is misguided and ignorant.

Posner begins his book by detailing Oswald's troubled youth. Posner describes Oswald's mother as a "domineering woman, consumed with self pity over the death of her husband and because she had to return to work to support Lee, his brother Robert, and a step-brother" (Posner 5). As a child, Oswald was frequently moved from home to home and spent time in an orphanage. He became withdrawn and temperamental. As he grew, he began studying politics and gained inspiration through the works of Karl Marx. When Oswald joined the Marines at the age of 17 in 1956, he was already convinced that American capitalism was a corrupt system and that communism was the future. Oswald was known to say such things as "the best religion is communism" (Posner 30) and greeted his fellow Marines by saying, "Hello, Comrade" (Posner 29). He studied the Russian language and kept to himself throughout his Marine service, though he did manage to cause a fair share of trouble by disobeying orders and through other mischief.

After Oswald's discharge from the Marines in September 1959, he returned to America, but did not stay for long. Oswald had decided to defect to the Soviet Union and Posner walks the reader through the process by which Oswald left the United States and gained access to Russia. Obviously, Oswald's time in the USSR raises serious concerns about the potential that he was part of a covert operation. However, as Posner points out, Oswald was clearly nothing more than a disillusioned young man who was seeking attention by promoting himself as an American communist. Posner quotes several people that knew Oswald at this time and who would unequivocally deny that Oswald was a member of either the CIA or KGB. As Oswald's American acquaintance George de Mohrenschildt points out, "no government would be stupid enough to trust Lee with anything important (Posner 89).

Oswald did enjoy minor celebrity status when he first entered Russia. As an American, Oswald invoked curiosity among the Soviet citizens. They nicknamed him "Alik" because the name Lee sounded "too Chinese" (Posner 58) and they accepted him in to their ranks. However, Oswald soon became disappointed with his work in a local factory and when the curiosity surrounding his arrival waned. Oswald felt betrayed. In time he "slowly discovered the Soviet system was much more regimented than he had ever imagined. Expecting to find a classless society, the fulfillment of Marxist theory, he instead recognized that the Soviets promoted a privileged Communist party class while forcing most of the population into compliant workers' collectives" (Posner 61). As his resentment grew, Oswald did find comfort when he met his future wife, Marina, at a dance in Minsk. The couple soon married and Oswald began planning to leave Russia and return to the United States, which, after spending three years in the USSR, he considered to be "the lesser of two evils" (Posner 70). His return to the United States is also the cause of some suspicion because of the almost seamless nature in which it was completed. However, as Posner points out, Oswald's approval to the U.S. was "not easily obtained from either government, nor was it speedy" (Posner 72). Posner goes on to educate the reader as to how the repatriation process worked and how Oswald's case was no different from others who had gone through the same process.

Upon returning to the United States with his new wife, Oswald continued to demonstrate his disdain for capitalism and what he considered to be "right-wing" causes. In fascinating and gripping detail, Posner traces Oswald's steps as he sought to establish himself as a left-wing leader and champion of Marxist theory in both New Orleans and Dallas. Posner allows the reader to become intimately involved in Oswald's life and state of mind during this time period. From Oswald's obsessive fixation on Cuba and Fidel Castro to his attempt on right-wing General Edwin Walker's life (with the same rifle that was used to kill Kennedy), Posner paints a chilling and descriptive picture of the man who would go on to become one of the most notorious murderers of all time. Posner tells story after story about Oswald's actions before the assassination and offers clear evidence that Oswald was certainly a man who was capable of committing such a terrible act.

Perhaps most fascinating, however, was the evidence that Posner offered in his description of the events surrounding the day of the assassination, November 22, 1963. In reading about Oswald's actions on that day, the reader becomes convinced that he was certainly involved in the crime. For example, Posner discusses how Oswald was driven to work that day at the Texas School Book Depository by a co-worker, Buell Frazier, who noticed that Oswald was carrying a strange package that he told Frazier was "curtain rods" in to work that morning (Posner 225). It is clear, however, that the package actually contained the Mannlicher-Carcano rifle that was used to kill Kennedy. Posner also takes the time to analyze eye-witness statements and to interview those people who saw Oswald at work on that fateful morning and

afternoon. From those statements, the reader must draw the conclusion that Oswald was on the sixth floor of the Depository at the time of the shooting.

Next, Posner offers medical and ballistic proof in the assassination. These key pieces of evidence help to pinpoint with almost complete accuracy that there was only one shooter and that he was located on the sixth floor of the School Book Depository. Posner uses visuals and expert medical and ballistic opinions to back up his thesis. He readily takes on even the most bizarre conspiracy theories by offering counter-arguments and iron-clad proof to debunk their claims. *Case Closed* is littered with the author's footnotes detailing exactly how he reached his conclusions. Unlike other authors on the topic, Posner presents an argument with literally no holes. Though the American public is often inundated with conspiracy theories and wild accusations about who may have been involved in the assassination, Posner takes the opposite approach in his book. He coolly and methodically offers scientific facts that prove beyond any reasonable doubt that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in killing President Kennedy.

One of most often debated issues surrounding the Kennedy assassination centers around whether or not Oswald could have physically committed the killing in the amount of time that was given. The home movie taken by Dallas dressmaker Abraham Zapruder allowed authorities to get an exact timeframe of the gunshots and provided even the most novice investigators with hours upon hours of "evidence" to pour through. The "magic bullet" theory, which said that one bullet caused the wounds to President Kennedy's neck/throat and all of Governor John Connally's wounds, was accepted by the Warren Commission, but has been the subject of much controversy since that time. Many conspiracy theorists have claimed that the bullet fired from Oswald's rifle could not possibly have caused all of the wounds that the Warren Commission said that it caused. However, Posner spends a great deal of time recapturing the Zapruder Film almost frame by frame and proves beyond a reasonable doubt that Oswald most definitely had the time to commit the crime and that the supposed "magic" bullet did indeed cause the wounds to Kennedy's neck and to Connally's chest, wrist and thigh. Posner even dedicates part of his Appendix to providing a pictorial representation of exactly how the bullet traveled as it struck both Kennedy and Connally. And on page 338 of his book, Posner summarizes the bullet by stating, "Ballistics experts have calculated the speeds at which the bullet would have entered and exited each wound on the President and the Governor. The 6.5 mm slug left Oswald's rifle at 2,000 feet per second and hit Kennedy at the base of the neck between 1,700 and 1,800 feet per second. Passing only through flesh, the bullet lost another one to two hundred feet per second and hit Connally at 1,500 to 1,600. It left his chest (after shattering Connally's 5th right rib) and entered the wrist at 900 feet per second. Anything above 700 feet per second is enough to shatter bone. When it left the wrist it was near 400 feet per second, just enough to break the skin and imbed itself into his

thigh” (Posner 338). Posner then goes on to visually recreate the exact seating positions of the President and the Governor to prove that the bullet did indeed travel on a path that was completely consistent with a shot fired from the sixth floor of the School Book Depository.

The assassination of President Kennedy was a defining moment in U.S. History. It can be argued that the event changed the course of our country’s history more so than other event in the second half of the 20th Century. Kennedy was a fresh face in politics who inspired an entire generation of young Americans. He was also an especially important politician to those leaders of the Civil Rights movement as he was one of the first national figures to sympathize with their plight. His untimely death stunned the nation and possibly lead to the drawn out ending to racial segregation in the south and to the increased involvement of the United States military in Vietnam. It is impossible to overstate the profound effect that Kennedy’s death had on the country. However, since that time, questions have surrounded the circumstances under which he was killed. Countless books, documentaries, and films have been dedicated to proving that Kennedy’s murder was part of a larger plan conducted by evil men who were somehow able to coordinate the perfect crime. Gerald Posner’s book, *Case Closed*, is refreshing in the sense that it allows the reader to finally put to rest any question about who was really responsible for the assassination. From the very first page, Posner stares down the critics who claim that the members of the Warren Commission were complicit in the cover-up of the truth regarding Kennedy’s death. Instead, he offers an incredibly detailed account of who Lee Harvey Oswald was and why he committed the crime. No other book I’ve read on the subject comes close to matching the tenacity with which Posner tackles Oswald.

In the classroom, I will use Posner’s book to explain to my students that Kennedy’s death had a profound effect on American culture. I will most likely compare the event to the terrorist attacks that occurred in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001. The students will be able to make a connection between the impact of the events and the aftermath of such a shocking development. In both cases, because of the magnitude of the circumstances, alternative theories to the plain truth have festered and grown in scope. Although I understand that it can be thrilling and entertaining to conjure up wild conspiracy theories, I believe that it is immensely important for our students to be able to separate fact from fiction with regard to history. At our core, history teachers are truth seekers. We study history because we want to know about and pass along the knowledge contained in the past. We can only serve this purpose, in my opinion, when we present the truth as best as we are able. To this end, Gerald Posner’s book, *Case Closed*, serves a great purpose. It allows us to reach a firm and final solution to the questions about the assassination of our 35th president. As a teacher, I can ask for no greater inspiration than in the work of a person who was determined to seek

the truth and ultimately found it and passed it along to those who were willing to listen.